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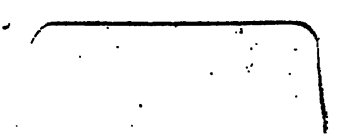

SCOUNDRELS & CO

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BY

COULSON KERNAHAN

Author of "Captain Shannon," "A Book of Strange Sins," "A Dead Man's Diary," etc.

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To

GEORGE DAVIDSON DEEPING

My dear Deeping,—

Ever since we came to this sunny little town, your hospitable house has been our second home.

To Mrs. Deeping and yourself we owe a thousand unreturned but unforgotten kindnesses.

Will she and you, who watched the growth of this story, chapter by chapter, and day by day, permit me to inscribe it "To our dear friends, Mrs. and Dr. Deeping"?

Very sincerely yours,

COULSON KERNAHAN.

Thrums,
Westcliff-on-Sea,
Essex.

A Word in the Reader's Ear

To "preface" such irresponsible work as *Scoundrels & Co*, would be to give new point to the charge of "taking himself seriously," which has been brought against the present writer.[1] But as he has been accused, not only of taking himself seriously, but of writing books "with a purpose," may he trespass so far as to say that the following pages have no purpose more serious than to while away an hour or two by "a yarn"?

[1] "Among the Young Lions," *Blackwood's Magazine*, June, 1898.

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Scoundrels & Co

CHAPTER I

I SEE A STRANGE SIGHT IN THE CABIN OF THE SEA SWALLOW

It was getting dark when I arrived at Southend, whither I had journeyed to join a friend who was on board his yacht. I had unluckily missed the train by which I was expected, so there was no one to meet me at the station, but knowing that my friend's little craft was to be some few hundred yards off the pier-head, I made my way to the beach, and hailing a waterman who had just come ashore in his skiff, I asked him if he knew Mr. Arthur Duncan's yacht by sight.

"No, sir," he said. "I don't know Mr. Duncan, nor his boat. What's her name?"

'Ah! That I can't tell you," I replied. know she's a ten-tonner and a yawl,

and that she was to be off the pier-head, but her name I don't know."

"That's all right, sir," said the man reassuringly. "She's there yet. The tide's just on the turn. If you'll jump in I can put you alongside o' her in twenty minutes."

He was as good as his word, but though as soon as we were within earshot of the yacht I hailed her with a lusty "Duncan, ahoy!" no one came on deck in response to my summons.

"I suppose my friend has gone ashore —perhaps to look for me—and has taken his skipper with him. He must have done so, because I see that the dinghy's gone. Never mind, I'll go aboard and wait for him." Saying which I scrambled from the skiff upon the yacht's deck, paid the waterman, and dismissed him.

As I had been up very late the night before, and the strong air of Southend had made me sleepy, I decided to go below and have a nap. My first idea was to make myself comfortable upon one of the cushioned lockers in the cabin, but, thinking to play a practical joke upon

Duncan, I disposed myself, instead, in the empty space under the sleeping berth in the fo'castle, covering myself with some old tarpaulins which had been bundled there—I suppose to be out of the way. The cabin was curtained off from the fo'castle by heavy plush hangings, but I managed to arrange the tarpaulins and the hangings so that I should be able to see what took place when Duncan entered. That done, I settled myself for a sleep, from which I was aroused by the bumping of a boat against the yacht's side.

There was a scuffling sound, as of somebody clambering on board. A voice which I did not recognize said, "Here you are, boatman," and a gruff "Thank'ee, sir," was followed by, "Wish you goodnight," as the boat was shoved off.

The dip of the oars had scarcely died away before another voice, which was unknown to me, hailed us from the water: "Sea Swallow, ahoy!"

"Sea Swallow, it is," said the man on deck, and soon a second boat grated against the yacht's side and put a passenger on board.

I was now beginning to feel rather uncomfortable. Should it turn out that the yacht on which I had so foolishly concealed myself was not my friend's craft, after all, I should look extremely silly when called on to account for my presence there. Hence I need scarcely say that I awaited the advent of the new-comers with considerable anxiety—anxiety which was not relieved by the fact that, instead of coming below, they remained on deck talking together in tones so low that I could not catch their words.

By-and-by one of the two said, "Here's another dinghy," and soon a third boat ran alongside of us, followed not long after by a fourth and fifth, which arrived simultaneously.

Then when a sixth, and finally a seventh, had put a passenger on board, a voice, which I had not before heard, said,—

"Come, gentlemen; let us get below." The tone in which the words were spoken seemed to imply a command rather than a request, and was certainly not that in which a host would address his guests.

But whatever might be the relations

between the speaker and the rest of the company, the simultaneous shuffling of feet overhead told me that the proposal to adjourn to the cabin had received the assent of the meeting.

As the cabin was lighted by a swinging oil lamp, and the fo'castle, where I was concealed, was entirely in darkness, I ran very little risk of discovery; but all the same—when I heard the first step upon the companion ladder which led from the deck—I instinctively drew back my head under the tarpaulins, where I could neither see nor be seen.

After about half a minute I made bold to advance my head again, so as to get a sight of what was going on. And such a sight!

For the first moment I could not believe my eyes, but was persuaded that I was still sleeping. How else was I to account for the sight I saw, except by supposing that the whole business of the seven boats, each carrying a mysterious passenger, was a dream of which the present scene was a continuation?

Standing around the table were seven

men, all so exactly alike that I should not have been surprised had I been told that I was looking at one man surrounded by six facsimiles of himself.

No one who had seen that sight, under such circumstances as I saw it, would have wondered that I could not believe the evidence of my senses, but lay there open-mouthed and scarce daring to breathe, my eyes journeying in a circle from face to face and from figure to figure, till I was dazed and drunken with imbecile astonishment.

All the seven were of swarthy complexion. All had bushy brown hair, with brown beards, trimmed in the same manner. All wore glasses, and all were dressed exactly alike in blue serge suits, with turn-down collars, blue and white spotted sailor scarfs, and black bowler hats of similar shape. While I was gaping at this singular spectacle, one of the seven took the seat at the head of the table with his back to me, motioning to the others to seat themselves, which they did, three on each side, leaving the space at the foot of the table unoccupied.

Then the chairman struck the table sharply with his open hand.

"Let the candidate for the seventh place on the council stand forward," he said.

For the space of three or four seconds nobody stirred. Then a man, who was sitting near the entrance to the cabin, shot to his feet as if taken by surprise, squared his shoulders, with his arms lying stiff at his side, and stood in the attitude which in the drillyard is known as "at attention." I could not see the face of the man at the head of the table, but I knew instinctively that the two eyes of him were covering the candidate, like twin guns in a battery screwed up to cover a target. Though his back was to me, I seemed in some way to feel the penetrating intentness of his eyes, and to share the discomposure which the object of his scrutiny was evidently experiencing. The military stiffness of the upstander's bearing seemed to ooze out of his fingertips. His shoulders contracted, and his head, which at first was well thrown back, came forward, and into his eyes stole a

sheepish, furtive look which but ill became him.

All this was not lost upon the man at the head of the table. It seemed to me that his voice took on an added sharpness as, with the single word "There," he pointed with his pen to the foot of the table, where the candidate would be facing the company. The man moved to the position indicated, and then the chairman addressed him in a hard, cold voice,—

"You have come here as candidate for the seventh place on the council? Is that so?"

"That is so," replied the other sullenly.

'I need not tell you that you have not been invited here to-night without due consideration as to your suitability for the post you seek to fill. I may tell you too that you have been a 'marked man' for some months past. If I mistake not, you have suspected the position of affairs in regard to this council for a long time, and we had decided that one of two things must happen—either that your undoubted ability must be enlisted on the side of the council, or else—well—that the council

must be protected from any injury you have it in your power to do us. What the latter alternative would necessitate need not now, fortunately, be dwelt upon. You have, I believe, been sounded—carefully, of course—in regard to your readiness to undertake the responsibilities of the post. Am I right in supposing that you do not come here altogether ignorant of what these responsibilities mean?"

"I do not," said the candidate.

"You are aware that once having joined us there is no going back, and that for the man who plays us false there is only one penalty?"

The fellow nodded.

"Very good. And, on the other hand, you are probably not unaware that there are certain advantages accruing to a seat on the council which are not altogether to be despised?"

"I had surmised as much," said the candidate, almost insolently, and with a greedy glitter in his small eyes.

"Very good," with an inclination of the head. "Is it your will, brothers, that

this man be elected to the council in place of Councillor Number Seven, whose name we have decided to remove?"

He looked inquiringly at his six colleagues, some of whom responded with "Yes," while others merely nodded assent.

"Very well. You are elected, and will be known henceforth as Councillor Number Seven. You may perhaps think, considering the importance to yourself, and to us, and to others, of the post you now occupy, that our ceremony of election is somewhat informal. But we are men, and in earnest: not children playing at being conspirators. Hence we go through no melodramatic form of 'initiation,' and exact from you no harrowing vow. We, who constitute the council, are united by the strongest of all bonds—self-interest. That is a bond which binds men more closely than any oath. Sit down, Councillor Number Seven. Now that you are one of us, it is right that you should be taken into our confidence to some extent. You are no doubt aware that most of us here are more or less officially connected

with certain organizations and societies, some of which are secret, and some of which are not?"

"Quite aware," was the prompt response.

"All of which are of a political nature?"

"That I understand, too."

"Very well. Just now there is a big public that is in favour of agitation of every sort,—of leagues, associations, and unions,—and we have practically got the management of such matters into our own hands. Then, as you know, there are some secret societies which are not ungenerously supported in this country and in America, and these, too, we may be said to control. In fact, if I may use such a term, we who constitute this council form a sort of syndicate for the taking over and carrying on of everything in the way of agitation and revolt, from a secret society for the assassination of crowned heads and tyrants, down to an agitation against an unpopular landlord, a political meeting, or a strike. Do I make myself understood?"

"Perfectly."

"You have perhaps, however, surmised

that, although we fully approve the patriotic and commendable sentiments which inspire so many thousands in England and America to subscribe their money for the carrying on of the work, we ourselves are not inclined to give our services entirely gratuitously?"

He paused and looked curiously at the new councillor, who nodded his entire consent and hearty approval of this statement of the case.

"In fact, you will not be surprised to learn that—like statesmen and patriots, who devote their time to the public service because they find that by doing so they can best forward their private interests; like clergymen and ministers, who so long as people are willing to pay for religion are quite ready to preach it; and, in short, like every one else who is not absolutely a fool—our first consideration, in the conduct of whatever business the public think fit to entrust to us, is, not to put too fine a point upon it, to feather our own nests. It is quite true that there are many men and women working in connection with these associations and

societies who, there is no denying, are honest and disinterested; and very good decoy ducks they are too, to bring the money in. But such men and women, though they do not suspect it, are simply our tools. We are not, of course, such fools as to spoil our own game by killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. But in our case the game is a very easy one to play. If an attempt—successful or unsuccessful—upon the life of some hated monarch or unpopular statesman, the blowing up of a palace or prison, or similar demonstration, did not occur every now and then, our subscribers would begin to think that they were getting nothing for their money, and supplies would cease. But though much of the enormous power which is given to us by the complete control of all these societies, leagues, associations and unions is used by us for political purposes, we do not hesitate to use this same power in the interests of our own pockets. For instance, if we heard that large sums of money or other valuables were being conveyed from one place to another, or were secreted in any partic-

ular building, and we could avail ourselves of the power which we have at our control to secure that sum of money for ourselves, we should not hesitate about putting the machinery into motion. Do you remember the mysterious robbery at the Duchess of Doncaster's?"

"Why, yes!" gasped Number Seven, for once genuinely surprised. "One hundred thousand pounds in jewels and hard cash disappeared, no one knew where."

"Precisely," said the chairman coolly. "They did not realize so much as that, however, although, owing to the fact that we have agents in most of the continental cities, we have exceptional facilities for the disposal of valuables.

"That now, as a case in point, could never have been negotiated successfully but for the intricate machinery which we have it in our power to set in motion. No ordinary 'conveyor'—if I may use the term—could have carried that bit of business through to a successful issue, even with the assistance of skilful confederates."

"And the proceeds of that haul, do I understand that they were divided among the seven councillors?" asked Councillor Number Seven, with glittering eyes.

"Precisely. It was a benefit performance. You are still desirous of assuming the—shall we say—responsibilities of councillorship?"

"Need you ask?"

"And when would you like to commence the duties?"

"This minute."

"Good. Well, as I have told you, we do not, when we elect a new member to the council, exact any solemn oath of secrecy from him. The rule—the invariable rule—which we have adopted in place of any such meaningless exaction is this. Whenever a new member is elected, that member has to qualify himself, so to speak, by carrying out personally the first 'removal' which may be decreed by the council. We do this as much for our own protection as for any other reason. The fact that a member is equally 'committed' with ourselves and has rendered himself liable to the same legal penalties, is the

best guarantee of his loyalty that we could possibly have. Do you follow?"

"I follow," replied the new councillor, doggedly.

"Well, this is the situation. We recently elected to a place on the council—to the very place you now fill—a new member. He had taken life on more than one occasion, and we thought we were sure of our man, or we should not have invited him to join us. But we have since discovered—it is the one and only mistake of the sort we have made—that we have been misled in him. Not that he is not fully as eager to accept responsibility—even the most dangerous responsibility—as any of us. On that ground we have no cause for complaint. But the fact is that when he joined us he was under the impression that our motives were entirely disinterested and patriotic. The discovery that we were not altogether uninfluenced by personal considerations was a shock to him, and produced so great a revulsion of feeling that—as we have ascertained—he is in communication with the police, in order that he may serve the cause about

which he is so infatuated by ridding it of the men—ourselves—who in his opinion are its betrayers and enemies. He is at this moment alone on board the little yacht which lies in a straight line a couple of hundred yards farther out to sea than this vessel. At present the police know nothing of what he has to tell them. The matter has not gone far enough for that. All that he has done is to send word to a certain detective that he has an important communication to make. He has asked that detective—Detective Marten—to join him at twelve o'clock to-night on board the yacht to receive the communication. His reason for so doing is as follows: The council was to meet on board this yacht not to-night, but to-morrow night. The man who intends betraying us does not know that we are aware of his intended treachery and that we have altered our date of meeting. He thinks it is to-morrow that we are to assemble, and after he has made known our plans to the detective he will propose that our meeting be allowed to take place, and that then, when we are gathered together here like rats in a trap,

the police shall surround the yacht and make the whole of us prisoners. It is a prettily enough arranged programme, but the poor fool has underrated our abilities and our resources for obtaining information."

"And where do I come in, in this business?" asked the newly appointed councillor nervously.

"Ah! you are business-like," replied the chairman, with a smile. "Listen. The detective is to join Councillor Number Seven, as we will continue for the present to call him, at midnight, on board the yacht I have told you of. It will be our business to see that he is prevented from getting there, and you may rely upon our doing it, for the resources at our command can accomplish anything. We are going to take you ashore with us in the dinghy when this meeting is concluded. There a skiff will be waiting for you, in which you will row out to pay a visit to Councillor Number Seven. In fact, you will go there personating his expected visitor Detective Marten. He has never seen Marten, and doesn't even

know what he is like, which simplifies matters very much. You see this india-rubber ball, scarcely bigger than a marble? You will have no difficulty in concealing it in the palm of your left hand. You notice that there is a tiny tube or pipe to it? Well, Councillor Number Seven has a long story and a dry one to tell you, and from what I know of him, I can promise you that he will offer you refreshment, and will not want much pressing to join you himself. You must make some opportunity, when he is not looking, to pass your hand over his drink. As you do so, squeeze the ball, and if one drop of what it contains goes into the whisky, your business will be done. But even if you can't manage the business that way, you will have no difficulty in effecting his removal, for he has arranged to give the detective a berth for the night, and you can easily chloroform him when he is asleep. We'll supply you with the drug for the purpose."

"And what do I do with the body?" asked the new councillor. His face was now deadly pale, and his fingers were

picking at the braid on his coat while he spoke.

"That too we have arranged," was the answer. "You see that brown leather hand-bag on the locker? Lift it. Rather heavy, isn't it? Let me show you what it contains. This weight attached to a chain is heavy enough to sink the bodies of two men. When your business with Councillor Number Seven is transacted, you will slip the chain round his ankle, fasten it so, and drop the body overboard. Then haul up the anchor, row ashore, and leave the yacht to drift with the tide. She may go a long way out to sea, and the farther the better.

"On the first of next month the council meets again, when you will make your report. Put this letter in your pocket. It contains instructions as to where we meet and under what circumstances.

"And now about the disguise. You received, before you came here to-night, the clothes you are wearing, the false beard and the rest of it, with instructions in regard to 'getting up.'"

"Yes," said the recruit; "but I didn't know that all the seven were to be disguised alike, and it gave me a turn when I first came down in the cabin. It is the cleverest thing I ever saw, for be hanged if the seven of us aren't as alike as two peas. If we were all shuffled together like cards in a pack I don't believe I could pick out any one of us again to save my life. What's it for, and how do you know each other again?"

"We don't know each other again," was the calm reply. "No man here except myself, so far as I am aware, knows the name of any of his fellow-councillors. Why should they? There's no chance of my turning informer. If I turned Queen's evidence a thousand times over, it wouldn't save my neck. What there is against me is too bad and there's too much of it for that ever to be thought of. Hence we are known to each other only by a number. You are Number Seven, and I am Number One, as I ought to be, for I originated the whole concern. Every man here has been selected and invited to join us on my

responsibility alone. I do the thing carefully, you must admit. In your own case, for instance, I knew what your suspicions were about the council and I had satisfied myself that it would be safe to make overtures to you, or else you would not have received the invitation in response to which you are here to-night. And yet you don't know who I am, nor whether you and I have ever met until to-night. Is that so?"

"It is."

The admission was made grudgingly and reluctantly. But, blended with something very like fear, there was, in the way in which the words were spoken, the submission of one who recognizes his master.

"As for your inquiry, 'What's it for?' " went on the councillor who had called himself "Number One." "I should hardly have thought a man of your acumen would have needed to put the question. The facts about a concern of this sort can't be kept too close. Why should you put your head into a noose of which others hold the string? Don't you

see it's safer for each individual councillor if his identity is kept a secret? This man whom you are replacing on the council—if he'd known who his fellow-councillors were, it is very possible that he'd have given all our names to the police and that each of us would have had two or three detectives on his track who would have arrested us separately. As it is, all he can tell them is that the whole of us meet here to-morrow night; but who we are and where we hang out, he can't say: so that it is only now and then, and for a few hours, that we run any danger. And I need hardly tell you that we didn't come here to-night until I had satisfied myself that no trap was being laid to take us, and that there was nothing stirring among the police beyond what I have already spoken of. Can't you see, too, what advantage this system of our all being disguised alike presents? You will have to put your beard and wig in your bag when you go to see Number Seven, because you go to him personating Marten. But you will resume the disguise when the business is done. Suppose you are seen

coming ashore after accomplishing the job, and a description of you gets into the hands of the police. They will at once inquire at the two railway stations if a man answering your description has been seen, and they will be told 'Yes,' for the six of us will be leaving Southend,—as far as possible by different routes or by different trains,—and the police will be pelting all over the country after us, leaving the course almost clear for you. Don't you see how it scatters the scent? And even if they lay hands on one of us—which they won't, for our plans are all prepared beforehand—we have so arranged things that it would be easy enough for the one in question to clear himself. That was how we managed the Duchess of Doncaster's business. The man was seen—it was one of us here; I needn't say which—and but for our trailing a red herring across the track, he might have been nabbed. But we switched the bobbies off upon another scent, and a pretty fools' dance they were led, while the real man got away with the swag. The police are at a big disadvantage in

fighting us. When we bring off any little job, they start, knowing nothing about it, and what they get to know they have to find out, which takes time; whereas we start knowing all about it, and with all our arrangements made beforehand. In fact, seven determined men with brains, all working together as we do, can snap their fingers at Scotland Yard; and it seems to me that there is a big future for this syndicate as a business concern. What say you, Councillor Number Seven? Are you still as strong as ever on joining us?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Let's get to business. We'll go ashore now, gentlemen, and arrange for the new councillor, Number Seven here, to make his little call upon Councillor Number Seven that was."

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and led the way to the deck, the recruit following closely behind him with the bag. In a very few minutes the dip of their paddles had died away, and, cramped and chilled by my long vigil, I crept out

from my hiding-place into the now empty cabin, wondering how best I could go to work to frustrate the villainy of this precious Syndicate of Scoundrels.

CHAPTER II

HOW I WARNED A DOOMED MAN OF HIS DANGER

I was not long in making up my mind. Had I known anything of yachting, I should have set sail, hauled up the anchor, and made for shore; but no First Lord of the Admiralty knows less about a boat than I did at that time. Row ashore I could not, as the rascals who had just left had taken the dinghy, and I did not like to call out for help, lest I should bring the same crew of scoundrels back to the yacht. Unless I made an effort to swim to the pier-head I should have to remain on board all night, and in the meantime murder was being done.

Without more ado I slipped off my clothes and dived into the water, striking out with all my strength. But it was not to be. The tide was now setting seaward at a great pace. Struggle as I would, I soon realized that it was impos-

sible to reach the pier-head; so I ceased swimming and, turning on my back, I let the current drift me, feet foremost, towards the yacht which I had just left, paddling meanwhile with my hands, that I might keep my body on an even keel. As I neared the yacht I raised my head a little and squinted across my chest to my toes, to make sure that I should not be carried past her. In doing so I caught a glimpse of another small vessel that lay some quarter of a mile farther out to sea and in the direct line of the current. It was no doubt the very boat on which the crime was to be committed. With the tide in my favour it would not be difficult to reach her, so I turned on my chest again, and passing under the yacht's counter, I struck out boldly for the farther craft.

By the time I reached her, I was quite exhausted, and when some one jumped up suddenly and called out, "Is that you, inspector?" I thought it better to say "Yes," and to get on board as soon as possible, than to expend what little breath still remained in my body by

entering upon what under any circumstances would be a difficult explanation.

"Well, I've always heard that you were a tricky one, Marten," said my new friend. "But I'll be hanged if this doesn't beat cock-fighting. Fancy your swimming all the way out so that no one should know where you were going to. I guess you're blown a bit, aren't you? We'll go below and have a drink, if you'll wait here a minute while I light the lamp."

My swim from one yacht to the other had been undertaken in such a hurry that I had had no time in which to speculate upon the probable appearance of the person whom I had come there to warn; and I was therefore quite unprepared to find, when I joined him in the cabin, that he resembled in every way the seven mysterious beings whose extraordinary and uncanny likeness one to the other had so startled me an hour ago. Had I given the matter a moment's thought, I might have known that there was nothing strange in the fact that he was still wearing his disguise. But the events of the

night had made me suspicious, and as I stood there staring at him I could not help asking myself, "What if I am too late? What if this is not the man who was marked out for murder, but the murderer himself? Why did he bid me wait while he went down to light the lamp? and why was he so long about it? Can it be that I surprised him at his devilish work, and that while I was waiting shivering on deck he was putting the body out of sight and clearing away the evidence of his crime?"

While all this was passing through my mind my companion had been staring back at me in a way which showed that he too was ill at ease.

"What's the matter, inspector?" he said, looking about him nervously. "Any one would think you had seen a ghost. The cold swim has affected you a bit, hasn't it? Help yourself to a whisky. That'll put life into you sooner than anything."

He pushed first a spirit-decanter and then a water-bottle towards me with one hand, pointing with the other to a rack

on my right, where some glasses were neatly arranged.

I poured off a liberal allowance, and tossed off the half of it at a gulp.

"Why shouldn't this child have a drink too?" my companion said, with a feeble pretence at jocularity, stretching a hand across my tumbler to get at the decanter.

There was nothing in the action to arouse suspicion under ordinary circumstances; but as I thought of the india-rubber ball, small enough to be concealed in the palm of the hand, and of the deadly poison it contained, a sudden panic seized me, and, scarcely knowing what I did, I snatched up my half-emptied tumbler and dashed its contents on the floor. The man sat staring at me with a look in his eyes that to my dying day I shall not forget. His mouth dropped open all awry, like that of a paralyzed man. His face went grey, his lips white, then screaming out, "You're not Inspector Marten at all! I knew it from the first. You are one of those infamous seven—one of those devils from hell—come here to prevent me handing you over to jus-

tice!" he sprang forward, mouthing and gibbering at me like a monkey, and with outstretched, twitching fingers pointed at my throat.

I was on my feet in an instant, more anxious to explain the mistake into which he had, not unnaturally, fallen than to defend myself. But neither course was necessary, for the next instant his arm dropped to his side, and with a great groan he fell forward motionless upon the table. Agitation had brought on syncope of the heart. The man whose life I had come there to save was dead.

CHAPTER III

I FIGHT FOR MY LIFE

"You've made a mess of it, Marten, haven't you?" said a voice behind me, and, turning, I saw framed in the doorway a tall, clean-shaven man. He was holding the very brown bag which had been handed to him in my presence only an hour ago, but had he been without it I should have known that he was the newly-appointed councillor.

One surprise had succeeded another so rapidly on this eventful evening that I was less taken aback than might have been expected. And now that I knew how unscrupulous was the man I was dealing with, and what was the errand that brought him there, I realized at once that, naked and unarmed as I was, I should have to play my cards very carefully if I was to get out of the business alive. My only chance lay, so it seemed to me, in keeping up the rôle that had

been thrust upon me. So when the new arrival said, "You've made a mess of it, Marten, haven't you?" I replied as naturally as if I had answered to the name of Marten all my life.

"Yes," I said wearily, "I suppose, as you say, I've made a mess of it. But, since you seem to know me, I call you to witness that I laid no finger on the man."

"Well," said Number Seven, "all I know of the business is, that I had only just set foot on the yacht's deck when some one screeched out in the cabin. I hurried down as fast as I could, but was only in time to see our friend here throw up his arms and fall back. I'll stand by you if anything comes of it, however, and will swear that you didn't lay hands on him. But I know why he sent for you to come here to-night, and what it was he meant telling you; so before we go any farther I'd like to know how much he has told you and how much he hasn't. You needn't be afraid to speak out, for I was in his confidence; besides, I know as much of the matter as he did, and can very likely put you right on a point or two."

The fellow's motives in trying to wheedle me into telling him what had passed between the dead man and myself were not difficult to diagnose. He knew that Inspector Marten had promised to visit the yacht that night, and, finding me there, he had not unnaturally concluded that I was the wily inspector, and that I had in some way contrived to outwit the scoundrels who had been so confident of their ability to prevent the visit from taking place. If Councillor Number Seven could satisfy himself that no communication had been made to me by the dead man, he would not trouble himself greatly about my movements; but if, on the contrary, he had reason to believe that I had been made acquainted with the facts concerning the syndicate, he would at once decide that I must not leave the yacht alive. The villain had come there prepared to murder, and he was not likely to stick at a trifle when his neck and the necks of his fellow-conspirators were in danger.

"Oh," I said, "there isn't much to tell. I had only just arrived here a few

minutes, and our friend there had told me nothing of the business about which he had summoned me. I swam out to the yacht, as you see, instead of coming in a boat."

"Why did you do that?" interrupted Councillor Number Seven sharply.

"Why did I do that?" I repeated after him, so that I might have a moment or two's grace in which to frame some plausible explanation. "Why? Oh! only because I thought I could slip away from the shore unnoticed if I swam, whereas if I hired a boat I might attract attention."

It was an indiscreet answer, for my companion evidently interpreted it as meaning that I was not altogether unaware of the fact that steps were to have been taken by the syndicate to prevent Inspector Marten from paying his promised visit.

"But why should you suppose you were being watched at Southend?" he answered suspiciously.

"I didn't suppose," I answered; "I only wanted to guard against observation. But, as I was saying when you

interrupted me, I swam out instead of rowing, and being a bit cold after the long swim, I asked our host there to give me a drink before we got to business. He gave me one, and was going to help himself, when suddenly, without a word of warning, he jumped up as if to make a murderous attack upon me, and then fell dead, as you saw, killed by his own fury. However, there it is, and it can't be helped; so now I think I will bid you good-night, and get ashore."

"Not without a drink, at all events," said the councillor, with a singularly mirthless smile. "This is really a most unfortunate and unhappy affair, although I'm not a bit surprised at the sequel, for I've warned our friend there not once, but a dozen times, that his passion would cost him his life one day. But he was a hospitable man, and, as his friend, I stand in the place of host to you; so you must allow me to do the honours."

For all his protested politeness there was a look in his eyes as he spoke which convinced me that he meant to do me a mischief. If he believed that I was in

possession of no dangerous information, he would surely have let me go about my business unmolested; but his pressing me to drink foreboded no good, and when I thought of the india-rubber ball I wished heartily that I were safe on shore again. The honest truth is that the strain to which I had been subjected was beginning to tell upon me, and that my nerve was failing. I was possessed with a great desire to be done with the whole business and out in the open, so with a civil "Thank you; I won't take any more whisky to-night," I made a move towards the door.

He stepped forward hastily to intercept me, and we stood for a moment almost breast to breast, each looking the other in the face with eyes of menace.

"Will you allow me to pass, please?" I said, with freezing politeness.

"Not till I have satisfied myself about your share in this business," he protested with equal determination, pointing as he spoke to the corpse, and advancing one leg, as if to plant that limb more securely, and thus more effectually to bar the way.

In so doing he set his heavy heel right upon my naked foot, and with such force that the scar is there to this day.

Screaming with pain, and maddened beyond endurance, I struck out at him with my clenched fist, catching him fairly between the eyes, and with such force that the back of his head cannoned against the door with a bang that set all the crockery on board rattling like a housewife's china-closet after an earthquake shock.

To say the "fur flew" during the next half-minute would be—in view of my unclothed condition—an inaccurate metaphor; but all I know is that I was for that space of time as uncertain which of me was I, and which of me was he, as if the pair of us had been a ball of string in the claws of a kitten. For one moment we untangled ourselves, so to speak, to get breath; and I well remember with what joy I caught sight of the livid, ugly lump between his eyes where I had struck him. The next instant we were at it again, rolling over and over upon the floor like wild cats, and striving each to

throttle the life out of the other. No one who has not fought for his life stark naked, as I did then, would believe how much I was handicapped by the absence of clothing. There is not much protection, one would think, in coat, waistcoat, and trousers; yet without them I felt as a mediæval warrior might without his armour. The very buttons on my enemy's clothing fought for him. They were like so many claws that scored and scratched my skin; and when, while we were struggling, he got the upper berth, and knelt over me, with his knee pressed against my breastbone, I felt as if the chest of me was scarce stronger than a cardboard box. I was well-nigh gone that time, for he reached over and got such a vise-like grip upon my throat that my eyes stood out on their stalks, and my tongue was lolling from my head like a thirsty dog's. But if my lack of clothing disadvantaged me in one way, it advantaged me in another, for no eel could have been more slippery to hold than I. Straining every sinew in my body in one supreme effort, I managed to roll him off, and upon

his back, and wriggling from his grasp, I sprang to my feet on the look-out for a weapon. He caught at my legs to throw me, but snatching up the heavy whisky decanter by the neck, I whirled it aloft, and dealt him a blow behind the ear that put an end both to him and to the fight. At first I thought he was only stunned, but when I found that his heart had indeed ceased to beat (and small wonder, for I had hit him with terrific force, and upon a vulnerable spot), I stripped him, and, opening the brown bag, took out the weighted chain with which he had meant to sink the body of his victim. Then I lashed the pair of them—the man who was to have been murdered, and the man who was to have murdered him—together, and passing the chain around the ankles of both, I made it fast, and dragged my double and ghastly burden upon deck, where I toppled it over into the water.

"And now," I said, "I'll dress myself in the clothes of my late antagonist, and go ashore in the dinghy, taking with me the bag containing his disguise. In the pocket of his coat is a paper telling where

and when the next meeting of the Syndicate of Scoundrels takes place. What's to hinder me from going there instead of him? He's my height, figure and complexion, and, dressed in his clothes, and wearing the disguise which has been provided for him, there's no reason why any one should suspect I am not he, especially as I know enough of his affairs to give a very good account of myself and of to-night's work. Anyhow, danger or no danger, discovery or no discovery, when the next meeting of the Syndicate of Scoundrels takes place I shall be there."

CHAPTER IV

MY REASON FOR DECIDING TO PERSONATE THE DEAD COUNCILLOR

Before relating the adventures which befell me on the occasion of my personating the dead councillor at the meeting of the syndicate, I ought, perhaps, to state the reasons which led me to decide to be present.

Those who have done me the honour of following my narrative thus far may not unnaturally conclude that I am a professional detective. In that, however, they will be mistaken. I do not know that I am a professional anything, unless it be a professional failure. Being possessed of some private means, I am in the fortunate position of being able to choose my occupation, and, as a matter of fact, I have, as they say in America, "sampled" several professions. As an Irishman, not, I hope, without an Irishman's versatility, I found something to

interest me in each. But my dislike to what is called "shop" made it difficult for me to settle down definitely to any one pursuit.

The moody, run-in-a-circle "shop" chatter of the second-rate musician, who shambles yearnful and morose at your side; the insistent, assertive "shop" jabber of third-rate actors who stalk the Strand, their hard, lined faces and bold eyes proclaiming them members of "the profession," as they arrogantly style their art; the inconsequent cackle of literary "at homes"; or the shamelessness of the self-advertising scribbler, touting, bagman-like, for reviews,—all this I found and find insufferable. But, taking one thing with another—and since some amount of "shop" there appears to be in every profession—it seems to me that the craft of letters has, or should have, a tolerably wide "look-out." The "shop" of literature is, or ought to be, the world. It is because life is more fascinating than literature, that literature is so fascinating a profession. The man of letters is before all things a student of life. Hence he is

never without resource, for all life interests him. He never loses the sense of wonder. He can fold his hands devoutly, and with bowed head repeat after Robert Louis Stevenson that General Thanksgiving that breathes a more child-like spirit of true and joyous gratitude to the God and Giver of all than any Doxology.—

"The world is so full of a number of things
I think we should all be as happy as kings."

I had drifted into, rather than seriously adopted, the profession of authorship, but I was at all times ready to lay aside my pen for any enterprise that promised adventure; and here was adventure ready to hand, and calling for me to make the most of what it afforded. To play the spy upon such scoundrels, to "confound their knavish tricks," and to be the means ultimately of bringing them to justice, offered sport in plenty for my money, and would, moreover, give me an opportunity of putting to the test a long-cherished theory of mine. This theory is that a story-writer who has

attained some proficiency in his art is in possession of several of the qualities that go to make a good detective. That I shall be accused by some persons of talking the very "shop" which I profess to dislike is quite possible, but I submit that to discuss the principles of the novelist's art is very different from discussing the price per thousand words and the personality of the artist.

I contend that the qualities of mind which are necessary for the construction of a successful story are not very different from those which are required for the planning of a successful crime. The novelist makes a rough draft of his story, just as the criminal maps out his lines of action, and both fill in details and fit them together in a similar way. The novelist has, on the first blush of it, the easier task, for he has only himself and his own characters to manage, whereas the criminal has other people to reckon with; but I am not sure that the novelist does not find his imaginary characters quite as difficult to deal with as the criminal finds his actual folks. And the

novelist is no less liable to discover himself "in a corner" by reason of some unexpected development than is his fellow artist; and both are apt to court failure by neglecting to take probabilities into account, or by overlooking some unexpected and important factor.

Fortunately for the welfare of society, the average perpetrator of a crime is as wanting in originality as is the average perpetrator of a book; and if crimes were "reviewed" in the same way as stories, a critic might "slate" the two offences in almost identical words. For the commonplace misdoer only commonplace methods of detection are necessary. But for the more unusual criminal more unusual methods are required.

And if my theory hold good, a novelist —other things being equal—is by no means badly equipped as a criminal-catcher.

He is, to begin with, well informed and observant, and he has—if his successes have not been entirely meretricious—considerable knowledge of character. He is a psychologist, and, given certain con-

stitutional tendencies in conjunction with certain circumstances, can predict with tolerable precision the logical results. He has, if a capable novelist, the artist's power of entering into the lives of other people, of creeping, so to speak, into the criminal's brain. He can put himself into the criminal's place, see as the criminal sees, feel as the criminal feels, think as the criminal thinks, and consequently can determine with considerable accuracy the criminal's probable line of action. He can detect the weak point in a chain of evidence just as quickly as he can detect the weak point in the probabilities of a story; and he has the inventive and imaginative qualities which are so necessary for the construction and the following out of a theory that may account for an otherwise unaccountable crime.

In saying all this I am, of course, presupposing that the story-writer in question is a man of proved ability, and I am crediting him with capabilities to the possession of which I should no more think myself of laying claim than I should

to the Laureateship. But by dint of a peculiarly dogged determination, unwillingness to admit myself beaten, some luck, and perhaps a little natural capacity, I had been successful in one or two similar ventures; and, on the principle that every private soldier carries in his knapsack a possible field-marshal's baton, I saw no reason why I should not enter the lists.

CHAPTER V

I SQUIRM UNDER THE COLD KISS THAT A REVOLVER'S UGLY LIPS PRESS TO MY FOREHEAD

In the pocket of the coat which had belonged to the newly-elected Councillor Number Seven I found a paper which contained instructions regarding the next meeting of the Syndicate of Scoundrels. Here is a copy of the document in question:—

"Last day of month. Midnight. Gipsy wagon drawn up on waste space near first finger-post on high-road to Southend after leaving Leigh. Knock at door, and in reply to question 'Who's there?' state your number. Make yourself acquainted with locality beforehand, that you need not have to ask directions. Leave Fenchurch Street by ten o'clock p. m. train and alight at Leigh. Obey instructions implicitly, especially about leaving London by ten o'clock from Fenchurch, and destroy this when read without fail."

These were my "sailing orders," and plain and straightforward enough they seemed. I wondered at first why the very train by which I was to journey down was expressly stipulated, but a moment's consideration showed me that some such arrangement was very necessary. Otherwise it was possible that the whole seven of us might elect to travel by one and the same train, in which case the ticket inspectors could hardly fail to notice that seven men all exactly alike had passed the barrier.

It was not probable that Councillor Number One would overlook the complications that might arise from the fact of even two members of the council choosing the same train, and, as I afterwards learned, he had taken every precaution to prevent any such dilemma. Councillor Number Two had received instructions to stay at Leigh, whither he was to journey by the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway on the evening before the meeting. Councillor Number Three was also to start the evening before the meeting, but was to put up at Southend,

whither he travelled by the Great Eastern Railway. Councillor Number Four was to go to Southend by steamer on the morning of the council meeting. Councillor Number Five was also to start on the morning of the meeting, but was to use the Great Eastern Line. Councillor Number Six was to wait until the afternoon, and was to travel viâ Tilbury; and Councillor Number Seven (represented by myself) was to wait till the ten o'clock down from Fenchurch Street.

These instructions I rigidly obeyed, and on the last day of the month I was at Fenchurch Street Station in time to catch the train in question, and was so fortunate as to secure a compartment to myself.

I fully realized the risk I was running in thus electing to personate the dead man at the meeting of the Council of Seven, and had not come unarmed. I had put my unloaded revolver in one pocket and some cartridges in another, and did not intend to set foot inside the gipsy wagon, where the council was to meet, until I had made sure that the weapon

was charged in every chamber. When we were approaching Leigh it would be quite soon enough, I decided, to slip in the cartridges, and in the meantime I would do my best to shorten the long journey by means of a nap.

Like a friend of mine, who complains that no sooner has he put his head upon the pillow than some one knocks at the door and says it is time to get up, I can go to sleep at a moment's notice; so I lay down at full length upon one side of the carriage, and, putting my head upon the arm-rest at the end, was soon fast asleep, and, I fear, snoring.

I remember my awakening distinctly. Whether I had been disturbed by a sound or a movement I cannot say, but suddenly the stilled waters of my slumbers became troubled. It was as if, from a mirror reflecting a calm stretch of sky, a satyr face had leered. I stirred uneasily, and lay for some moments half asleep and half awake, but conscious of impending disaster; and when at last I opened my eyes, it was to find a man's face pressed close to mine. He was bending over me

as I lay, and his eyes, as I met them, seemed to fasten on mine and to hold me as a hawk's talons hold the screaming sparrow out of which he means to tear the life. So spellbound and fascinated was I by the intentness of the man's gaze that I was at first hardly conscious of the fact that he was pressing a revolver barrel to my forehead.

"Put up your hands," he said imperatively, and the ring of command in his voice recalled to my mind the scene in the yacht's cabin when the candidate for the seventh place on the council had been bidden to stand forward. But had I not heard my companion's voice I should have known him—if only by his eyes—for Councillor Number One, the leading spirit and originator of the infamous brotherhood. Excepting for the fact that he wore no beard, he was dressed exactly as when I had seen him on that eventful evening. The dark mustache, and the equally dark and bushy hair, were evidently natural; and I remember that as I lay there squirming under the cold kiss that the revolver's ugly lips were pressing

to my forehead, I said to myself, in the dazed, half mechanical way in which, in moments of supreme peril, one notes details, "So ho! my friend! It was from yourself, was it, that you took the pattern of the disguise which the seven councillors have to assume. When you want to disguise yourself all you have to do is to slip on the beard which you, no doubt, have in the bag I see in the rack behind you, so that you can assume or discard your disguise at a moment's notice, instead of having to 'get yourself up,' as the rest of the councillors have to."

"Councillor Number One" evidently included thought reading among his accomplishments, for, as if in reply to my self-communings, he nodded pleasantly and said,—

"Quite so. You are remarking, no doubt, upon the fact that, except for the absence of the beard, my personal appearance very nearly resembles the disguise you are yourself wearing. You haven't seen me in deshabille before, have you? But before we discuss that subject I have a question or two to ask you. I'll trouble

you to sit up, still keeping your hands above your head. And be careful how you move, as it would be highly unpleasant for you were this revolver to go off, as it certainly will, if you try any hanky-panky with me."

I rose to a sitting posture, with upheld hands, as bidden. Had my head been fastened to my body with gummed paper I could not have moved more gingerly, for the revolver barrel never budged an inch, but clung leech-like to my forehead while I shifted.

"And now," said Number One politely, "I'll trouble you, sir, to tell me who you are."

"I am Councillor Number Seven," I said.

"That's a lie!" he replied calmly. "You ought to be Councillor Number Seven, but who the devil you are, and how you come to be here and in that disguise, I don't know and can't think. If, as seems likely, you are a detective who has found out something, and you meant attending the meeting to-night, and plan taking us in our own trap, it is possible

that you know enough of me to understand that I'm not a man to be played with. Tell me who you are, how you came to get that disguise, and where the real Number Seven is, and I'll spare your life, under certain conditions. But you must be quick about it, and make a clean breast of it with no trickery, or, by God! man, I'll scatter your brain pan for you. No, it's no use your trying to look outside to see where we are, and if there will be a stoppage soon. I got in at Stepney, and the station we have just left is Upminster. So the train won't stop any more this side of Benfleet. Out with it, man, unless you want your brains outside your head instead of in it. Who are you?"

"Councillor Number Seven," I protested stoutly, seeing no way out of it but to lie.

"You're not. That game won't do for me. Now do as I bid you or it will be the worse for you. First of all, remove your hat. Now unhook the beard and take it off too. That's right, keep your hands up still. Now turn your face this

way, to the light, and let's have a look at you, but move carefully, for the trigger of this revolver is hung as light as a watch balance. No, I'm hanged if I know you. Come, you are quite a young man, whoever you are, and it's a pity to throw away your life out of sheer obstinacy. I'd rather spare you than shoot you, especially as I want to know who's blown on us. When you are dead meat what good will it do you whether we are nabbed or not? Once more, who are you?"

"Councillor Number Seven," I repeated doggedly.

"'Twon't do!" he said decisively. "But come, I'll give you a chance. You say you are Councillor Number Seven. What's his real name, then?"

This was a poser which I tried to evade by answering his question with another question,—

"Didn't you tell me yourself at the last meeting of the council on board the yacht that the names of the different members were kept secret?"

"So that's how the land lies, is it?" he

said, with a whistle. "You were concealed on that yacht, were you. You were a brave man and a bold one, my friend, to have put your head into that den of lions. It seems a pity to spill such brains as yours for nothing. Let me see if I can't find out something about you for myself, since you won't tell me. Put your left hand in the breast-pocket of your coat and take out any papers you have there. But don't forget that the revolver is at your forehead all the time, and at the first sign of disobedience or of anything like hanky-panky—snap goes the trigger, and bang goes your life."

I did as he told me, and took from my pocket the only paper which it contained. It happened to be no other than the very document giving notice of the place and date of the meeting, to attend which I was then on my way. As the reader knows, I had taken it from the pocket of the dead man whom I was personating, and when I realized what document it was, I knew that the sight of it would bring matters to a crisis.

As yet, however, Number One had not

recognized it, for it was folded when I took it from my pocket and held it out to him.

"No, thank you, my friend," he said, with an ugly smile. "It's very kind of you to wish to take me into your confidence in regard to your private papers. You have no doubt overlooked the trifling fact that if I took that paper into my hand to open it, my attention would be withdrawn from your agreeable self. Not that you would take any unfair advantage of my pre-occupation, I am sure. But somehow this little bit of cold steel with which I am cooling your heated brow seems to have so beneficial an influence upon you—seems so to stimulate your faculties and to render you so willing and obliging—that I should be sorry to deprive you of its influence. Perhaps you will favour me by opening that paper and holding it out before you, so that I can read it without having to remove this little plaything from your forehead. No, wait a moment. I think we'll have a bigger target this time. If your head were by any chance to jerk aside while I am engaged, I might

miss you when I pull the trigger, and get into trouble with the railway company for damaging the paddings of the carriage. Sit still now, while I shift the popgun."

So saying, he slowly lowered the revolver till it was between my eyes. Then he brought it down the bridge of my nose until it was over my mouth, and I could smell burnt powder, and thence he let it travel down my chin and my neck till it was pressing against my breast-bone.

"Just an inch or two to the left," he said, suiting the action to the word, "and we shall be all right. There! now we're snug and comfortable. If you'll kindly open out that paper and hold it so that I can read it, I'll be obliged to you."

I did as he told me, but with unwilling fingers, for I knew that the sight of it would, as I have already said, bring matters to a crisis.

Nor was I mistaken, for the start which he gave when he set eyes on it was so great that I felt the revolver leap against my chest, and was minded to cry out to him to have a care lest he slipped the trigger.

"My God!" he said, "this is worse than I looked for. Either that man Number Seven has played us false or else you killed him before you got possession of this."

As he spoke he bent forward slightly to assure himself that the document was not a forgery, and thus gave me what I knew was my only chance. His fine words about wishing to spare my life I took no account of, knowing very well that had he not wished to discover who I was and how I came by the knowledge I possessed, he would have shot me at sight. If by promising me my life he could induce me to tell him whether what I knew was known to others, he would then be aware with whom he had to deal; but if he were in too great a haste to make what he called "dead meat" of me, he would have no other opportunity of obtaining the information he desired.

But that he would spare me one minute longer than suited his purpose I did not for a moment suppose, and I had all along decided that I must wait for my opportunity, and when it came, take it. That

opportunity had, I felt, now come, so when he bent forward to look more closely at the document, I let go of the thing and struck with all my strength at the hand that held the revolver, hoping to dash the weapon aside. Had things been as he thought they were, that moment would have been my last, for he had, no doubt, expected some such onslaught, and had made of his arm a very bar of iron, so that my blow scarce budged the revolver an inch. At the same moment he pulled the trigger, and, knowing what was coming, I shut my eyes and waited to feel my life rush out of the hole made by the bullet.

But, to his and my astonishment, the revolver gave tongue to no more deadly sound than a click, and, looking down, I saw, to my amazement and joy, that it was my own unloaded revolver he was holding.

I had, no doubt, surprised him by awakening while he was bending over me, and, catching sight of my revolver in my pocket, and having no weapon of his own, he had in all probability snatched

at it, and had presented it at my forehead, with what result the reader knows.

Again he pulled the trigger, and yet again. Each time the weapon derided him with a harmless click, as if it were, so to speak, putting its tongue in its cheek.

With an oath he flung it from him, and at that moment the engine of the train whistled for the stoppage at Benfleet.

"That settles the matter," said Number One, standing up to stretch himself and then sliding his hands into his trouser pockets negligently. "I'm beaten, and I'm ready to take my defeat like a gentleman and surrender quietly. Do you intend to hand me over to the authorities here or at Southend?"

"I didn't say I was going to hand you over to the authorities," I answered; "I'm not a detective. But the authorities at this hole of a place and at this time of the night consist in all probability of a boy who takes the tickets. I don't think we'll trouble him."

'As you like," he said indifferently, sitting down with outstretched legs and

looking at his boots critically. "As you like, my friend. It's all the same to me."

I made no answer, but when the train was moving again after leaving Benfleet Station he walked to the window near which I was sitting and leant out, as he said, to get a breath of air.

As he leant, resting on his arms, he kept up a constant chatter of conversation, turning his head every now and then to look at me.

I pretended to be indifferent to what he was saying and to his movements, but I promise you that I kept a keen eye upon him all the same. And as the event proved, I had reason to suspect him, for when he turned round to look back at me with some banter by which he hoped to distract my attention, he slyly slipped out a fist and turned the door-handle. This done he withdrew his head and walked to the other end of the carriage.

"I'll wish you good-night, my friend," he said. "I'm going to open this door and hang on to the footboard till the train is slowing off outside Leigh, and then I shall drop off and slip away."

I very naturally sprang to my feet to prevent him, when having got me, as had, no doubt, been his plan, between himself and the unfastened door, he suddenly leapt upon me, to push me against it, and so out upon the line. But I was not the fool for which he took me, for, divining his purpose, I dropped suddenly down, so that missing me he fell heavily against the door, and the handle being turned, pitched out head foremost upon the line.

Very quickly I shut the door again, and when we got to Leigh I took his bag from the rack and giving up my ticket passed out. The village was now almost in darkness, so, turning in the direction whence we had come, I skirted the line till I came to a gate, which I climbed and walked back between the rails till I came to the body.

Number One was lying on his back with his brains dashed out.

"I've been instrumental in sending two of these seven ruffians to their account," I said. "Now I'll pay a visit to the gipsy wagon, according to instructions, and interview the other five."

CHAPTER VI

I ATTEND THE COUNCIL OF SCOUNDRELS

"Who's there?" said a voice from within, in response to the stealthy summons which I rapped upon the door of the gipsy wagon where the council was assembled.

"Number Seven," I made answer, in accordance with instructions.

I heard a bolt slip in its socket, but the door was opened so cautiously that there was scarcely space for me to squeeze in. Nor should I have been sorry to have squeezed out again the next instant, for, though the light was of the dimmest, the air was so sooty and greasy with the stench of burning colza that it stuck in my throat like a mouthful of oily soup, and I felt my stomach twisting in protest under my belt.

The next instant the light, which apparently had been turned down at my summons, was turned up again. I cannot say that the interior of the wagon was

much pleasanter to the sense of sight than to the sense of smell, for the smoky lamplight so jaundiced the faces of the six of us, that we resembled nothing so much as a batch of sea-sick passengers who look askance at each other, wondering who will be the first to give the signal to succumb.

"We are waiting for our chief, Councillor Number One," said the man who had opened the door. "Did you pass any one like him on the road, Councillor Number Seven? He would, of course, be wearing his councillor's disguise, but whether he had his bag with him, as usual, I can't say."

I did not consider it advisable to inform this honoured colleague of mine that the bag to which he alluded was tucked away in a hayrick, where I had bestowed it only a few minutes before, and that the owner of the article was lying on the railway line with his brains on the wrong side of his head, so I contented myself by replying that I had seen no one after I had left Leigh.

The man at the door inclined his head

gravely in acknowledgment, but said no further word, and for some quarter of an hour we stood there without speaking. Except for our breathing and the ticking of our watches, there was a silence which every moment became more oppressive and more aggressive. To my overwrought nerves it seemed singing with disaster. It was like a brooding presence, ominous of evil, and soon—what with the fetid air and the heat of the place—I began to feel light-headed, and could have sworn that this same silence had slowly begun to gyrate around me, like a gigantic wheel that increased in momentum with every revolution. Nor was I the only one of the company with "nerves," for when a sleepy but would-be-sober beetle, gravely wheeling homeward from some seductive beetle-haunt, blundered against a window-pane—as a drunkard, who, vowing that he can walk straight, reels against a tavern door—the whole six of us jumped like startled cats at the sound of his horny tap.

The incident was not, however, without a sequel, for one of the party (I dis-

covered afterwards that he was Number Two), whose "jump" had been accompanied by a word unaccustomed to ears polite, but whose sins were not all uncovered by that cloak to the wearer of which much may be forgiven, that cloak which can transform the raggedest of rascals into a presentable personage and an agreeable companion—need I say I mean a sense of humour?—took advantage of the diversion to make a sensible suggestion. He remarked that he had always been taught and was quite prepared to admit the truth of the Scriptural precept that "the way of transgressors is hard," but as for himself he did not see why the transgressors—as he presumed the occupants of that wagon were—should be poisoned in this world as well as roasted in the next, and he begged leave to move that either the door or the window be opened.

It was not a brilliant observation, but it brought about two good results—the letting in of some fresh air and the letting out of the awkward constraint which had bound us. Laughter is the greatest of

levellers. To ask a man to drink with you—which, according to our English social code, is the very running up of the flag of fellowship—is not half so effective in setting you and him upon good terms with each other, as is a hearty laugh in common. From laughing at this allusion to the way of transgressors we went on to discussing the situation as it then presented itself, and as there was still no sign of the advent of Number One, we decided that something had happened to detain him, and that, as we could do nothing without him, we had best postpone the discussion of business till the next day, when he would, no doubt, make an opportunity to join us. In the meantime we must pass the night where we were, so each of us proceeded to make himself as comfortable—or, rather, as little uncomfortable—as he could in our very luxurious lodgings. For myself, what with the unusual circumstances, the tragic struggle in the train, the impatient tossings, turnings, twistings and sighings of my companions, vainly straining after ease on their most uneasy couches, I slept

never a wink all night, and was glad indeed when morning was far enough advanced for one of us to venture abroad in search of breakfast for his colleagues. It was not long before he hurried back empty-handed, bringing us, in place of breakfast, news which was no news to me.

"Fellow councillors," he said, with evident agitation, "I have terrible tidings for you. Our chief, Number One, was killed on the railway last night. He must have been walking along the line on his way to join us, when he was knocked down between Benfleet and Leigh by a passing train. They were bringing his body in when I got into the village, and, though he was wearing no beard, I recognised him at once."

For half a minute no one spoke, and then one of the councillors said curiously,—

"How did you recognise him if he wasn't disguised?"

"By his clothes, in the first place," was the answer. "He had the blue serge suit, turn-down collar and spotted tie which we

all wear. But I should have recognised him quite apart from that, for I was to some extent in his confidence, and, in fact, met him by appointment only two days ago."

"Who are you, then?" said the man who had constituted himself spokesman.

"I am Councillor Number Two—the oldest member of the society, next to our late chief. I was the first man to whom he unfolded his schemes and I was the first whom he invited to become a councillor."

"Can you prove this?"asked the other "I don't mean that I doubt your word, but, as none of us knows each other's name, there is nothing to prevent any of us from claiming that he is the senior member of the council. And if Number One is really dead, it will be necessary to elect his successor without delay, if the work of this society is to be carried on."

"Quite so," said Number Two. "Who is to be that successor will be for the council to decide, and need not yet be discussed, but as you challenge my statement and call upon me to prove that I

really was in our dead chief's confidence, let me ask if you or any other councillor can tell us what business was to be discussed at the meeting last night?"

"No, I can't," said the spokesman. "Is there any other councillor present who can?"

He looked around inquiringly, but no one spoke, and with something of a triumphant air, Number Two went on.

"The business which was to come before the meeting was two-fold. First the newly-appointed Councillor Number Seven was to make his report in regard to the removal of the traitor, Councillor Number Seven that was."

"Go on," said the other, nodding. "We might have guessed that far, even without being in the confidence of the chief."

"The second business," said Councillor Number Two, without noticing the interruption, "was to arrange a matter of importance. A week or so ago the police raided a house, No 89 Fassett Square, Dalston, in which a considerable quantity of dynamite was stored. That dynamite had been brought there from the Con-

pertinent by a man in the pay of our chief, acting on behalf of the council. Can any one present tell us the sequel of the raid?"

He paused and looked around inquiringly, but received no answer.

"I thought not," said Number Two, with evident satisfaction. "I can, as it was told me by our chief himself. Listen! The police made what they thought a big haul of dynamite, but they have left behind them more than they took away, and last night the facts were to have been placed before the council, that the dynamite might be secured and used for the carrying out of an enterprise which Number One has long been contemplating. Can any one tell me where the explosive which the police failed to find was concealed?"

Again there was a sullen silence. Then Number Two went on speaking with the air of a man who feels that he has the game in his own hands. "In the cellar of the house I am speaking of, there were a few dozen bottles of wine, half a dozen bottles of spirit, and a small cask of beer. The wine and spirit the

police took with them, and the beer they drank, leaving what they supposed was the empty barrel behind them. Their way of looking at things evidently was that, as barrels were made to contain beer, and as this particular barrel did contain beer—and good beer—and beer was made to be drunk, all they had to do was to drink the beer and there was an end of the matter. If they had taken the trouble to ascertain whether the barrel contained anything else but beer, they would have left the house with full hands as well as with full bellies, for the barrel was divided into two compartments, the lower containing that concoction of the devil, as out teetotal friends would call it—Double X, and the upper that pretty little plaything, which it has been left to man, and not to the devil, to devise—dynamite.

"Well, gentlemen," he went on, in a brisker and more business-like tone, "you all know the story of the quarrel between Lord Cranthorpe and his work people—that he has reduced the wages of more than a thousand men and women who work in his mill, taking twenty per

cent. off the men's payment and twenty-five off the women's, and has refused to listen to anything which is to be said on behalf of the people or to receive a deputation on the subject. He has taken advantage of the fact that he is rolling in money and that they are entirely dependent upon their earnings to act toward his fellow-countrymen as the rich act towards the poor in Russia. At this moment hundreds of families are starving through his greed. He is the best-hated man in England to-day, and nothing we can do would make the societies which we direct more popular among the people who support us than a blow aimed at him. This dynamite of which I have spoken was brought to England by the instruction of our late chief, who had intended at the next meeting of the council to propose the blowing up of Lord Cranthorpe's house in Plantagenet Square. If this could be accomplished by us successfully it would give a wonderful stimulus to our work all over the world, and would cause subscriptions to pour in, which, as the first handling of

whatever money is subscribed is one of the privileges (shall I say perquisites?) of being on the council, is a very desirable state of affairs. Gentlemen, there is not a moment to lose. I know the house where the dynamite is concealed. If you will appoint another member to act with me, I will undertake to obtain possession of the explosive that is concealed at Fassett Square, and to meet you here at midnight this day week, that we may make the necessary arrangements for using the dynamite in the manner in which our late chief intended—I mean in blowing up Lord Cranthorpe's house in Plantagenet Square."

He paused and looked around him in a somewhat dramatic, not to say melodramatic, manner. But he had spoken so confidently and with such evident conviction that it was very plain he carried his hearers with him. Just as we see a thread of ringed fire shine out upon the charred edges of a sheet of paper, when a live coal has dropped from the grate, so, as the last words fell from his lips, there ran around the circle of listening coun-

cillors a thin murmur of unmistakable approval. In the next instant—as the ring of smouldering fire breaks out into open flame—the murmur of approbation swelled into something like enthusiastic applause, and the very councillor who had hitherto seemed suspicious of Number Two's credentials called out,—

"Hands up, those who vote that Number Two's proposal be accepted."

Like a parcel of school-boys who shoot out eager hands for permission to reply to an easy question which has been asked by the master, the whole of the listening councillors (myself included, for I thought it wise to simulate the enthusiasm of my quondam colleagues) held up an assenting fist.

"Against," called out the self-constituted chairman; and there being no response, he, so to speak, let fall the hammer with a decisive "*nem. con.*"

"Thank you, brother councillors, for this mark of confidence," said Number Two. "The dynamite should not be left in that house an hour longer than is necessary. I should like, if possible, that

I and whoever may be appointed to work with me should catch the next train up, and I beg to propose that all other business before the council be postponed till we meet here seven days hence at midnight."

This also receiving the assent of the meeting, the council next proceeded to settle who should act with Number Two in obtaining possession of the dynamite. Lots were cast, and the duty falling to the share of Number Three, he was instructed to join Number Two in London, travelling thither by the other line, to avoid attracting attention.

"The only matter that remains for us to settle," said our self-constituted chairman, Number Two, "is that of our departure from this wagon. We must go at different times and by different routes; and as Number Two and Number Three are leaving this morning, I propose that Numbers Four and Five should wait until nightfall, and go by different routes, and that Numbers Six and Seven should leave to-morrow morning, one travelling by the Tilbury line and the other by the Great Eastern."

This was an arrangement by no means to my liking, as it would give Number Two and Number Three a day's start of me, and I had made up my mind to devote my best energies to frustrating their attempt to lay hands upon the dynamite. But, as my colleagues, Number Four, Number Five and Number Six, gave ready assent to the proposal, I did not think it wise to demur, though I confess it was with no little reluctance that I saw Number Two and Number Three depart upon their errand of devilry.

CHAPTER VII

HOW I CAUSED A HORSE TO RUN AWAY, AND THEN RAN AWAY MYSELF

My first business after leaving the wagon next morning was to regain possession of the dead man's bag, which I was disappointed to find contained nothing more important than a false beard. I then took the train to London, and after hurriedly changing my clothes at my chambers, I made my way to No. 89, Fassett Square, Dalston, the house where the dynamite was concealed.

As I turned the corner of the square, a brewer's dray drew up at No. 89, and a man wearing a red cap and an apron of brown sacking jumped down and knocked at the door. It was opened by another man at the moment I was passing. Both looked curiously at me, and then the driver of the dray said, in what I thought was an unnecessarily loud voice,—

"I've called for the empty barrel, and

to know if you have any orders for our firm."

Had I not heard his voice I should have guessed instinctively that he was Councillor Number Two, and that the asking for "orders" and mention of "calling for the empty barrel" was a mere blind with which to deceive the casual passer-by. The man inside the house was, I had little doubt, Councillor Number Three. How he had effected an entrance I did not know, but this driving up in open daylight of a brewer's van in which to take away what was apparently an empty barrel was a piece of "bluff," which, if only by virtue of its very impudence, might well have been carried through to a successful issue.

"Oh, yes, that'll be all right," said the man who had opened the door. "You'd better come down into the cellar and fetch it."

No one happened just then to be approaching, so the instant the door was closed upon this precious pair of scoundrels, I struck the horse that was harnessed to the dray under the belly with my stick,

making at the same time that peculiar clucking sound which signifies in the language current between horse and man "Go on." As I had intended, the animal plunged, and then started off down the square, the heavy van jolting behind him noisily. The sound must have reached the men inside the house, for the door was opened again hurriedly, and the two of them ran out into the road. When they saw what had happened, the fellow dressed like a brewer rushed in pursuit of the runaway, calling "Whoa! whoa!" as he went, and the other fellow, though he did not join in the chase, walked slowly after him to witness the result.

Here was my chance. I had strolled along in the opposite direction from that in which the horse was going, and the two men, having eyes only for the runaway, had not looked my way at all. Treading on tip-toe, so as not to be heard, I stepped softly back, and crouching down almost on all-fours when I reached the gate, I scrambled along the pathway and into the house, banging the door after me as I entered.

In less than half a minute the door was tried, and then I heard some one, whom I took to be Number Three, muttering an oath to himself under his breath. Soon after, there was the rumble of the returning van, and putting my ear to the key-hole, I could just catch what was said by a voice which I recognised as that of Number Two,—

"What are you standing there for, without a hat, you fool? Anybody would think you wanted to attract attention. Why don't you open the door and get inside?"

"I can't," was the reply. "The door blew to while I was looking after you, and the key's inside. But you've got a duplicate, luckily, so it won't much matter."

"Yes, it will, for my duplicate's at home," was the angry answer. "You've made a pretty fine mess of it, after all the trouble I've been at, to get an entrance and to arrange about the dray. Well, we can't get in without a key, and, what's more, you can't stand here bareheaded, or we are sure to be noticed. You'd best go somewhere and get a hat.

In the meantime I'll get rid of the dray (we can't bring it here twice in the same day), and get my key, and meet you at the corner of the square. We shall have to open the barrel and take the stuff away in bits, instead of in the lump, and it will be a risky job too. Now then, come along. We've no time to lose."

Once they were gone I began to explore the house from the top downwards. In a cupboard of the front bedroom I found a packet of plans and papers, which I commenced to overhaul Some of them puzzled me not a little, so much so that I must have spent more time poring over them than I was aware of, for the two conspirators had not been gone very long before I heard a latch-key turn in the lock downstairs.

"We must look slippy about it," said a voice, which I recognised as that of Number Two. "It's lucky I hadn't far to go to get rid of the dray and to get the other key. We'd better go down in the cellar at once."

In another moment I heard their footsteps upon the stairs that led to the

basement, so I slipped softly down into the hall, where I could still catch the sound of their voices.

Number Two was speaking. "Come, hurry up with those tools," he was saying. "The police are pretty sure to keep an eye upon the place still. The only wonder is that they haven't left some one in charge. Good God! what's that?"

And then I heard another and a deeper voice,—

"Move a step, either of you, and I fire. They *have* left some one in charge. Will you surrender quietly or shall——"

The next instant there was the report of firearms, followed by a scuffling noise and a cry.

I waited to hear no more.

"I'm better out of this than in it, and for several reasons," I said to myself. "My explanation wouldn't satisfy either side, if I were called upon to make it. If the Syndicate of Scoundrels gets to know I've been playing the spy on them, there would be another vacancy on the council, for the villains would never rest till they'd poisoned, or drowned, or knifed,

or dynamited me. And I don't know that I should find myself altogether popular with the police if I had to tell them my story. Besides which, they mightn't believe it, and, for all I know, I might find myself in the dock along with the other two. So I'll leave you to settle your little difference among yourselves, gentlemen."

One can think in three seconds what cannot be written down in thirty. The report of the pistol was still ringing in my ears as I opened the door, and, stepping out, walked away at a pace which, though it was not so rapid as to attract notice, was, I can promise you, smart. Very glad I was too when I had turned the corner of the square, but it was not until I found myself in a crowded thoroughfare, and knew that I had put a good five hundred yards between myself and the place, that I began to slacken.

The evening papers had no more eager reader than I that night, and it was with no little consternation that I saw the following announcement in a late edition:—

MURDER OF A POLICEMAN AT DALSTON

"A tragic discovery was made this afternoon at 89, Fassett Square, Dalston, the house in which a quantity of dynamite was recently discovered by the police. Constable X24 noticed when passing on his round that the front door was open, and on entering and searching the premises, he discovered in the cellar the dead body of the policeman who had been left in charge. The unfortunate man had been stabbed to the heart, but by whom there was no evidence to show, but that a struggle had taken place was clear from the fact that a revolver, one chamber of which had been discharged, and which has been identified as his property, was found lying beside him. It is, however, supposed that the crime was committed by some member, or members, of the gang by whom the dynamite had been concealed on the premises, and that they had revisited the house, not knowing that the police had left any one in charge."

And in the "Stop Press" space in the

paper, which is devoted to late news, I found the following—to me—extremely significant announcement:—

"The police refuse to give any particulars in regard to the sensational murder of a policeman at Fassett Square, Dalston. Our representative, however, succeeded this afternoon in obtaining a short interview with the wife of the murdered man, who has informed him of a curious circumstance in connection with the case. This is that an empty beer-barrel, which was lying in the cellar where the body was found, had been very carefully taken to pieces, and this she is confident was not done by her husband, who she assured our representative had no tools on the premises by which the work could have been accomplished."

"This is bad news!" I said to myself as I laid down the paper. "The scoundrels have not only got clean away, but they have evidently accomplished the object of their visit, and succeeded in taking the dynamite with them. It makes me feel very uncomfortable about the whole business; although even if I had

gone down to the cellar I should not have been in time to save the poor fellow's life; and after all, if the police don't take proper steps to guard premises which they are in charge of, it's their affair, not mine.

"But now that I know the scoundrels have got possession of the dynamite, and that they intend to use it in blowing up Lord Cranthorpe's house, I will make it my business to see that they don't do anything of the sort; and, knowing what I do of them and of their plans, I think I shall succeed, though I fancy I'm setting myself a risky job."

CHAPTER VIII

I BECOME A PAVEMENT ARTIST

As the Council was to meet again in seven days, the probabilities were that Number Two would take no further action until he had had an opportunity of consulting his colleagues.

But I knew him to be a consequential personage, ever ready to act on his own responsibility; and what was more likely than that so ambitious a man should go further than his instructions, and seek to strengthen his position as a candidate for the chieftainship by some master stroke which would confound and astonish his colleagues? If at the forthcoming meeting he could inform the Council that not only had he performed the task entrusted to him, and had obtained possession of the dynamite, but that he had actually put the explosive to the use for which it was intended, and had blown up the house of the offending nobleman, his zeal in the

cause could not fail to win the commendation of the Executive.

In view of such a contingency, I deemed it wise to keep an unwinking watch upon the condemned house; and I did not think I could better effect my purpose than by buying out the business, good-will and stock-in-trade, of a "pavement artist," who had installed himself not far from Lord Cranthorpe's residence, but on the other side of the way. Plantagenet Square consisted of a circular space, laid out in grass plots and gravel paths, and bordered by trees and shrubs. The whole was framed in by four rows of solidly-built, but exceedingly English-looking and ugly houses, which constituted the "Square," the central enclosure being surrounded by high iron railings, that had a broad pavement running around them. Here it was that the artist in question, by dint of much chalking and finger smearing, had succeeded in producing a highly-finished picture of a purple-faced and apoplectic-looking person in widow's weeds, which bore the loyal and not unnecessary legend, "God Save the

Queen." Much as this portrait of Her Majesty was admired by patriotic passers, the more critical were of the opinion that, as a likeness, it was not quite up to the level of a portrait of a mackerel, which formed the companion picture.

But the gem of the collection—in the opinion of materially-minded folk at all events—was a rasher of bacon, in which even such detail as the section of sawn bone was pictured so faithfully that one patron of art declared that it made him hungry to think of it frizzling in the pan; while for lovers and people of poetic temperament, a moonlight scene done in dark blue chalk with white effects, a sunset that glared in crimson and yellow, and a shipwreck in black and grey with a white lifeboat putting out to the rescue, completed the exhibition.

Having disguised myself as a working man, I waited until I knew there would not be many people passing, in order that I might ask the artist if he were willing to enter into negotiations for the sale of his business. He was sitting with his back to the railing, his cap being dis-

played beside him to invite the casual copper.

"What is it?" he said suspiciously, when I told him I wanted a word with him.

"Nothin' much, mate," I replied. "Only I've got a little money laid by, and thought o' settin' up in your line myself and wanted to buy a business. How much'll yer sell this yer show—stand and all—for, eh?"

To my surprise he leapt to his feet excitedly, and grasping the lapel of my coat, he peered into my face as if he expected to recognise me. Then he exclaimed in a voice hoarse with passion:

"Come, drop it! None of your tricks with me; I was prepared for something of this sort! Who are you? A detective, eh? Speak up! for I'll stand none of your nonsense!"

It was getting dark, but not so dark that I did not see a peculiar twitching of the eyebrows, which I had noticed as the only sign of excitement that Number Three had betrayed when, at the drawing of lots in the gipsy wagon, he discovered

that it had fallen to his share to assist Number Two in obtaining possession of the concealed dynamite. Yes, it was Number Three unquestionably, and I had indeed made as pretty a mess of the business as was possible.

Staggered as I was, however, I did not lose my presence of mind. "No! no!" I made haste to protest with earnestness, which was not all assumed, for his hand was at his side-pocket, as if in search of a weapon. "I ain't no sneakin' 'tec. Strike me dead if I am! I'm a pore man like yourself, mate, and I don't like the 'tecs no better nor wot you do, for if they knew what lay I was on, they'd nab me and no mistake, they would, rot 'em!"

"What's your game then?" he said shortly, but less aggressively.

"Well, it's like this," I answered; "there's a man wot lives in this Square as I'm goin' to put a knife into. You're a pore man and I'm a pore man. See! So you won't peach on me, I know. This man—a lord he calls hisself—he's took the bread out o' my mouth and out o' my

kiddies' mouths, and out o' the mouth o' my mates and their kiddies. That's wot he's done, the ——. Lord Cranthorpe's his name, and some of us—them as is men and not chickens—'ave met on the quiet and talked over 'ow we could get even with 'im. We're men, we are, not dogs to be kicked and starved an' robbed, an' our missises and kiddies starved, by the likes of 'im. And we've drawn lots which of us was to knife 'im, and I drawn the billet and got to do it. Well, my mates they sent the 'at round, and got a bit o' money together to 'elp me in doin' the job. So as your lay's just a-nigh 'is 'ouse, I want to buy out the business, so as I can 'ang around without 'aving no perishin' p'liceman harsking questions. Then I waits for my man when 'e's comin' in or goin' out when there ain't nobody by, and then I spikes 'im. See? You're a pore man and so'm I. Eh? That's right, ain't it? On the square too. Well, 'ow much do yer want for it?"

"I don't want anything," he said. "I shall go straight away and put his lordship

on his guard, and then shall set the police on you. That's what I shall do."

"That's what you'll do, eh, is it, yer bloomin' monkey?" I said, with a great assumption of fury. "*You* give hinformation to the p'lice, yer perishin' pavement spiler! No, yer won't, not much; not if I 'as to swing for yer!"

"There! there! my friend! That's all right," he said. "I only wanted to see if you were made of the right stuff or not. How was I to know that you weren't a detective in disguise, and that all this talk of yours wasn't a plant to take me in? Now look here! If you are in earnest in all this, so am I. I have a bone of my own to pick with Lord Cranthorpe, and that's why I'm here. Can't we work together? Two heads are better than one, and I can put you up to a better way and a bigger way—a thundering sight bigger way—of sending Lord Cranthorpe to blazes than by putting a knife into him."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before I had jumped to the scoundrel's scheming. Number Two, under whose

direction Number Three was acting, had shifted the most dangerous part of his mission—the actual conveyance of the bomb to Lord Cranthorpe's residence—upon the shoulders of his subordinate, who, in his turn, thought to make use of me as his catspaw in the same manner.

To affect to fall in with his dastardly plan would be the surest way to induce the plotter to show me his hand; so, protesting with a profusion of oaths that I was ready to listen to anything that promised to make more terrible the vengeance that was to be meted out to Lord Cranthorpe, I invited him, in suitable language, to tell me what he wanted me to do. Evidently gratified, and perhaps not a little relieved by the success of the stratagem by which the decree which he dared not disobey could be carried out without risk to his own precious person, he took my arm, and leading me towards the shadow of some trees at the corner of the Square, began to unburden his mind of the business. Scarcely had we got our heads well together, however, when suddenly, silently, and without a moment's

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warning, something whizzed between us. Though I was not conscious of any direct blow, I found myself flung forward as forcibly as if I had just been discharged from an enormous catapult, and after whirling, a confused tangle of arms and limbs, in a sort of human catherine wheel, and executing a couple of somersaults, I landed finally on the pavement, where I lay listening to the music of the stars that were singing in my ears as well as staggering away before my eyes. A bicycle, going at racing pace, had run into us, and had knocked the conspiring pair of us apart as neatly as a couple of "kissing" billiard balls are knocked spinning in opposite directions by the impact from a ball which comes piping hot from the stroke of the cue. I grieve to say that when I began to get some breath back in my body the first mouthful was put to no better use than the utterance—the emphatic utterance—of the single and sinful word, "Damn!"

"I quite agree with you," said a voice, the owner of which I was still too dazed to see. "A most sensible remark, I'm

sure, and my own sentiments entirely. Say it again. It will do you good."

I said it again.

"Precisely," the voice went on; "it's not generally considered a word to make glad the heart of man, but in the present instance you couldn't have hit upon one to gratify me more. It was quite soothing in fact, for I thought at first I had killed you, and that word was the best assurance I could have that you hadn't yet gone to heaven and become an angel. It was too human."

I sat up, rubbing the back of my head ruefully, and looked around. Number Three had gone—whither there was nothing to indicate; but a tradesman's cart had drawn up to the kerb, and by the light of the lamp I saw standing over me, with what in spite of the levity with which he had spoken, was a face of concern, a tall, dark, determined looking man. Two of his fingers were clipping the undercuff of his coat sleeve in order to stretch the cloth sufficiently tightly to form an improvised brush, with which he was gingerly scraping away at the dust on his

brown bowler hat; and I saw that his hair, which he wore short, was, though thick and curly, quite grey. Whether his fresh complexion, bright eyes and black moustache suggested some sort of contradiction to his grey hair, and thus tended to make him look out of the common, I could not at first say, but as I stared up at him I was conscious that there was something unusual, if not of distinction, about the man.

"Well—now that you have got your senses back—don't you think that you ought to be ashamed of yourself for obstructing the thoroughfare, pitching me off upon my head, not to speak of the damage you've done to the bicycle and to my arm?"

He held up his left arm as he spoke, and I saw that the sleeve was ripped up, showing an ugly gash at the elbow.

"I'm very sorry," I said, unmindful of my own hurts, and with a want of spirit which was probably due to the fact that my brain was still a bit confused.

"Tut! tut! man," he stuttered, as if disarmed by my meekness; "the fault

was as much mine as yours, for I had no right to be travelling at such a pace. I hope you're not hurt? Let me lend you a hand up."

I took the proffered hand and leapt to my feet; but my haste cost me dear, for my right ankle twinged to such purpose that I squealed with pain, and speedily sank to the ground, where I sat groaning and squirming till the pang passed.

"So bad as that, is it?" said the collider. "Poor chap. How far off do you live?"

"A long way," I replied. "I couldn't get there if I travelled all night."

"Why? Where *do* you live then?"

"Nowhere," I answered, thinking vaguely that it was possible Number Three might be lurking within earshot, and that I had best sustain the rôle I had assumed.

"Great heavens! And they call this a Christian country! Never mind. We can make up a bed for you at my place, and then I'll see what can be done. Are you out of work?"

"Yes," I replied. "I was one of Lord

Cranthorpe's mill hands, and we're all out on strike."

"What!" he cried, "are you one of that rascally, skulking crew?—a set of ruffians who are driving the trade out of the country into the hands of Germans, and cutting their own throats into the bargain, at the bidding of a lot of scheming agitators who wouldn't be tolerated for a moment anywhere but in England. If I'd have known—but there, I expect you're more fool than knave. That's my house just past the lamp-post. I am the blood-sucking tyrant, Lord Cranthorpe, who, according to your friends the agitators, am battening and fattening on the brow sweat of the starving poor. Here, lend a hand—you with the cart I mean—and we'll carry this poor chap over. We'll make up a bed for him somewhere in the basement, so that he won't have to strain his foot by hobbling upstairs. You take his head and I'll take his feet. It's the first house past the lamp-post, and be careful how you go down the area steps."

My foot was so painful that I winced

nervously as he stooped to raise me, but no woman could have been defter of hand or more tenderly considerate than he, and my transit was accomplished painlessly. They carried me through a sort of passage opening upon the street, to an inner room, where I was propped up on a huge wicker chair, my injured foot resting luxuriously upon another chair. Then Lord Cranthorpe explained the situation to the servants, telling them that I was to remain in the house until my foot was healed, and giving strict injunctions that they were to make me as comfortable as possible during my sojourn under his roof.

Comfortable, however, I cannot say I was, for, with one exception, the whole staff of servants appeared to resent my advent as an intrusion. They were civil enough in attending to my wants, and in their own phrase, "passed the time of day with me" when they had cause to enter the room where I was located. But though I did my best, for obvious reasons, to get upon good terms with them, they never seemed at ease in my company. This was especially noticeable in the

matter of meals, for once or twice, when I asked to be allowed to take my food with them, their awkwardness and silence were most oppressive. They watched me furtively, as if to get an opportunity of conveying fork, spoon or knife to their mouths at the precise moment when my attention was engaged elsewhere, and on one occasion I detected the cook in the act of taking lunch on the stairs rather than join a party of which I was a member. I tried to solace my vanity by telling myself that this might be due to some instinct which warned them that they and I were not upon the same social plane; but as the only member of the staff who was at all inclined to accept my advances was a wisp of a scullery-maid, named Amelia, whom the others persistently snubbed, and to whom I heard them allude as of "no class," it seemed likely that the diagnosis of the case should have been the other way about, and that I, as well as Amelia, was considered as wanting in "class"—whatever that may be.

Amelia herself, however, was more

than disposed to be friendly, and it was from her that I learnt certain facts which had no unimportant bearing upon my enterprise. The most significant was that she was engaged to marry a "hartist"—which engagement having only been recently formed, she was burning to communicate to some one.

"An artist?" I said with some surprise when she announced this piece of fashionable intelligence; "an artist, eh? How did you come to meet him?"

"Yes, he's a hartist," she replied assertively. "He draws the most lovely pictures you ever see in chalk on the pavement, and his colours is hexquisite. I met him in the Square one night, and he told me he'd fell in love with me right hoff."

Bit by bit I drew the story of her "hartist" lover from the silly but unsuspecting girl, and when I learnt that each night he entrusted to her care a parcel, which he called for early the following morning—which parcel was supposed to contain chalks—I began to feel that the case was developing.

"'Enery—did I tell you his name wos 'Enery—Mr. 'Enery Talbot—lives a long way hoff," she said, "so, 'e sed, wot's the good of 'is luggin' his chalks along with 'im hevery time? So 'e just leaves 'em for me to take care of at the harea door of a night, and as I'm up fust in the mornin' I gives 'em 'im out again when 'e calls. But it ain't so much to save 'isself trouble as to 'ave a word with me as he does it. 'E as good as told me so last night, though 'e is mighty particular about his ole parcel all the same."

I was beginning to get interested in that parcel; though I am free to confess, that had I known, during the three nights I had already passed under Lord Cranthorpe's roof, that his hospitality had been extended by proxy to articles in the possession of my friend Number Three, my slumbers would have been less child-like and peaceful.

My foot was practically healed, and I was only hanging on as Lord Cranthorpe's guest for my own purposes. But now that I knew that the basement of his lordship's house was being used as a sort

of cloak room for the storage of parcels containing a deadly explosive, my natural delicacy made me feel how very desirable it was that I should not outstay my welcome, or trespass unduly upon my host's hospitality.

Hence I decided that the following morning should witness my departure, but as I preferred making my exit by means of my legs rather than with the assistance of dynamite, and as I proposed moving only to the next street, and not—on this occasion at least—right away to the next world, I came to the conclusion that I should sleep more peaceably if, before retiring to rest, I could satisfy myself that on that particular night, at all events, Mr. Henry Talbot's parcel contained nothing more dangerous than chalks. So, instead of hobbling off at nine o'clock into the little room where my bed had been prepared, I remained chatting with Amelia. By-and-by she began to get fidgety, being, as I could see, impatient for the moment when by carrying a lighted candle three times past the window, she could let her lover know,

according to the signal which had been arranged between them, that the other servants were at supper and the coast clear.

The signal had scarcely been given before there came a gentle tap at the area door, and leaving me in the inner room, she hurried out Juliet-like to greet her Romeo.

"Here's the parcel of chalks, pretty one," I heard Mr. Talbot say. "Put them away carefully for me darling, and I'll call for them as usual in the morning."

Amelia had left the door leading into the passage slightly ajar, so that I had been able to play the eavesdropper without leaving my chair, which was fortunate, for the next instant she stepped coquettishly into the room with a brown paper parcel in her hand, which she popped into an open drawer, and then, with a saucy nod to me, popped out again.

Her lover seemed to be in a hurry this particular evening, for I heard Amelia say, "Wot, you ain't a goin' yet. Put down yer 'at and coat and give us a kiss."

Presumably the obedient Henry put

down his hat and coat as directed, whereupon Amelia snatched them up playfully and running once more into the room where I was sitting, threw them upon a chair, and returning to Henry said triumphantly:

'There! you shan't 'ave 'em back again till you be'ave yerself. A nice young man you are to walk out with a gal, and never even want to give her a kiss."

"That's soon put right," was the reply, and from the sounds which reached my ears, I have cause to suppose that Henry was as good as his word. Presumably, however, preoccupation of some sort tended to make him less amorous than usual on this occasion, for when Amelia next spoke there was a ring of disappointment in her voice.

"D'ye call *that* a kiss? Why don't yer give us a real 'ug."

An ardent lover, when the object of his adoration thus coyly capitulates, and gives him to understand that the favours she has to bestow are his for the asking, might reasonably be expected to snatch her passionately to himself, and to cover her

lips, hair, and cheeks with burning kisses, but Mr. Talbot's reply to Amelia's tempting invitation consisted, so far as I could gather, of a mumbled protest about having to be going now.

"Very well, Mr. 'Enery Talbot," snapped the slighted maiden, "I'll give you yer old parcel back and wish you good-hevening; and perhaps you'll find another young woman to walk out with another time."

"O Lord love us, what a lot you women are!" groaned Mr. Talbot in a voice which, though intended to be persuasive and conciliatory, sounded to me more like the voice of a man to whom it would have been an intense relief to tear his own and perhaps his companion's hair. "Lord love us! I never knew such a fool as you are in my life. I did't mean anything, my dear. You know I love you better than—lump sugar, I do," and from the noises which ensued, I gather that he was bestowing "real 'ugs," with an ardour, which, if assumed, was sufficiently ursine to satisfy the most exacting of maidens.

Here was my opportunity. Very quietly I reached over, and took Mr. Henry Talbot's parcel of chalks from the drawer. As I held the package, with a hand which haste and nervousness made none too steady, something metallic rattled ominously; and when, with thumping heart, I laid my ear beside the thing to listen, I distinctly heard the clock-like beating of an infernal machine. Repressing the insane but perhaps natural inclination to dash the horrid object away, and mastering, by sheer will-control, the blind, unreasoning rush of panic-stricken impulses that sprang up within me, I tiptoed across the room, and lifting Mr. Talbot's coat, I stuffed the parcel into the pocket.

How long I sat in my chair, looking in a sort of frozen horror of calm at a dirty brown bowler hat and a grease-soiled yellow overcoat, reeking of bad tobacco and stained with beer—neither of them objects to be associated readily with tragedy—I cannot say. To me, who fancied as I sat there that I could hear the stealthy working of that devil's plaything

and hour-glass, ticking away the lives of human beings—of whom it was possible I might myself be one—it seemed a very eternity before Talbot said, "Now get me my coat and hat and I'll be off."

But when, some minutes after, a dull echoing roar, as of the distant discharge of musketry, set the windows rattling in their sockets like teeth in a skull, causing Amelia to drop a plate with a crash, and to scream out, "Wot hever's that?" I knew that Number Three of the infernal Brotherhood had handed in his papers to no earthly chief, but to that arch-conspirator who is the master of every murderer.

CHAPTER IX

A DIABOLICAL PLOT

The day after the explosion was the day appointed for the Council meeting, and as I intended to be present, I bade adieu to Plantagenet Square and its master, and took train for Leigh.

The Syndicate of Scoundrels was fast resolving itself into an association of common-place criminals, with very little claim to anything like originality. Under the direction of a master-plotter like Number One, it had no doubt been a formidable and powerful organization; but since that arch-scoundrel had, through my instrumentality, been sent to his account, the whole company seemed falling to pieces for want of a capable head. Number Two, who was ambitious of assuming the dead chief's mantle, was clearly an unscrupulous rascal, but that he had any special gifts as an organizer and director had yet to be proved. The fact that when

arranging for the meeting which was about to take place, he had forgotten to give instructions upon such important points as the routes to be taken, was a significant testimony of his incapability for details. Such an omission could never have taken place under the chieftainship of Number One. Had that artist in crime been at the head of affairs, it is very doubtful whether I should have been allowed to put foot inside the house at Fassett Square; nor would the little manœuvre by which I had frustrated the attempt to wreck Lord Cranthorpe's reidence have been quite so easy of accomplishment.

I did not forget that Number One had not failed to discover my presence in the Southend train on the very first occasion on which I had attempted to personate the dead conspirator, nor that he had penetrated my disguise at a glance; and though the struggle which had taken place between us that evening had resulted in his defeat, it was luck more than skill that had constituted me the victor.

The game of chess which was being played between myself and the syndicate of scoundrels was at present in my favour, inasmuch as I had succeeded in removing from the board a queen and two pawns, to wit Number One, Number Three and Number Seven. But as I had only one piece to lose, and as the contest became more difficult and more dangerous as the number of combatants grew less, I felt—when I knocked for the second time at the door of the gipsy wagon on the Leigh Road—that I should have to be both wide-awake and wily were I to come out of the business alive.

I had scarcely joined the party, which now consisted of five, including myself, when one of the conspirators, whom I recognised as Number Two, held up his hand, as a sign that he wished to address the meeting.

"Those of you who have seen the morning paper," he said, "will scarcely need to be told that our number is now complete. Death has removed another member of the Council since our last meeting. On that occasion I undertook with the

assistance of Councillor Number Three to obtain possession of the dynamite that was concealed at Fassett Square. I have kept my promise; but I regret to say that through some wretched bungling on his own part, my unfortunate assistant has lost his life. You have seen in this morning's papers the account of a singular occurrence which happened last night. A man, carrying a coat over his arm, and walking somewhat hurriedly, was observed to stop suddenly—as if in alarm—and to feel in the pocket of the coat. The next instant he flung the coat from him and started to run, but he had not gone three paces before there was a tremendous explosion. As the affair happened somewhat late at night, the man carrying the coat was the only victim. But according to the newspapers, he was blown to pieces so literally that identification is thought to be impossible.

"Fellow Councillors, there is every reason to suppose that the victim of the explosion was our colleague Number Three. I had thought it wise, after securing the dynamite which was con-

cealed at Fassett Square, to make two parcels of it, entrusting one to my collaborateur and retaining the other myself, so that, in the event of either of us falling into the hands of the police, this Council would still be in possession of sufficient dynamite to carry out any project which has been formed. Number Three was to have brought the explosive here to-night, and why he was carting it about the streets last night I cannot say. The only supposition I can put forward is based upon the fact that the explosion occurred quite close to Plantagenet Square; so I am inclined to think that Number Three had, upon his own responsibility, decided to make an attempt to anticipate the decree of the Council, and to blow up Lord Cranthorpe's house—with what result you already know."

Except for something between a gasp and a groan on the part of one listener, and on the part of the others a simultaneous sigh which bore evidence to the painful interest with which they had heard the narrative, there was a dead silence for some time after Number Two

had ceased. Then a councillor said somewhat uneasily—

"And the dynamite which you retained in your own possession?"

"It's here," replied Number Two shortly, holding up—with what I felt was quite misplaced and unnecessary energy—a brown leather hand-bag which he had been carrying in his hand.

I am bound to confess that the Council did not display the interest which might have been expected. Even so observant a member as myself was conscious of a curious disinclination to come to a nearer acquaintance with the contents of the brown bag; and there was an unmistakable, if unostentatious, disposition on the part of my colleagues to gravitate in the direction of the door. One member had in fact put a hand upon the latch, when Number Two added, with just a suspicion of a smile:

"And—as I don't want to join Number Three just yet awhile—quite securely packed, I assure you!"

The man who had put his hand upon the latch, being thus relieved of his

anxiety for the safety of an honoured colleague, took occasion to rebuke any tendency towards timorousness on the part of his fellow-conspirators, by remarking witheringly that he'd be glad if the members would leave him room to stand up in, and would not push him against the door. And when the councillor who, upon the production of the brown bag, had displayed most eagerness to edge towards the exit, had relieved his feelings by expressing a wish that the next time "any one had anything to be afraid about he hoped they wouldn't compel him to move by treading upon his toes," and a third councillor had conceded jocosely that he was "bound to say he'd had a bit of a start," the meeting resumed its normal aspect.

'Yes, gentlemen," continued Number Two somewhat inflatedly, "that bag contains the larger portion of the explosive of which you commissioned me to obtain possession. I now leave it to you to decide whether I have or have not failed in accomplishing what I had undertaken."

"Oh, yes, you have scrambled through

the business," said a long-faced, rather round-shouldered man, who was, I afterwards learned, Councillor Number Five; "you have scrambled through it right enough, though at the cost of the life of a fellow councillor."

"That was not my fault," retorted Number Two angrily. "It is due to the fact that this Council is at present without a head. Number Three was instructed to assist me, but was not enjoined to obey me implicitly. Had it been so he would not have dared to go beyond his instructions, as he appears to have done last night; and then we should not have lost good dynamite and a valuable life to no purpose. I pointed out at the last meeting of this Council how important it was that some member be selected to take the place of our late leader; and just so long as we remain without a head, just so long may we expect nothing but such unhappy fiascos as happened last night."

"The moral of all of which is," put in Number Five dryly, "that you are trying to force the hand of the Council in order that you yourself may be appointed to

the post about which you are so eloquent. But there are others who are quite as fitted to take the reins."

"Yourself, for instance," sneered Number Two angrily. "I had surmised that you were jealous of the fact that I am your senior on the Council; but your motives for trying to belittle what I have done are so apparent that the Council will know how to estimate them at their proper worth."

"No doubt our fellow councillors are competent to estimate your motives *and* mine correctly," replied Number Five indifferently. "In the meantime, may I inquire how our dead chief's bag came into your possession?"

The question had the effect of turning all eyes, my own included, upon the article referred to. I saw, to my consternation, that it resembled in every way the very bag which, after Number One's fatal fall from the train, I had taken from the rack where he had placed it, and had hidden in a hayrick before paying my first visit to the conspirator's wagon. Before leaving Leigh, however, I had

regained possession of the bag, and had carried it with me to my chambers in Buckingham Street, where I had locked it away, in case I might want it at any time as evidence. If Number Five were right, and the bag which Number Two was holding were indeed—as appeared to be the case—the very article which had belonged to Number One, it must have been stolen from my chambers in Buckingham Street. But this implied that one at least of the conspirators was aware of the part I had played in recent events, and was aware, too, that I was there that evening as a spy, in which case a terrible vengeance was in store for me.

Number Two's reply seemed to me an age in coming, as I stood there like a prisoner waiting for his death sentence, a cold sweat trickling down my forehead and into my eyes.

"Yes," he said, and I could have killed him for the drawl with which he spoke, "yes, you're a keen-eyed man, my friend, for all your jealousy. It is Number One's bag, isn't it? You recognise it, don't you? Would you be surprised to hear

that this is the fellow to his—the duplicate, don't you call it? He and I bought a bag apiece at the same shop and at the same time, so there's nothing very wonderful in the two being of the same pattern. You were clever at mares'-nesting, weren't you, when you were a boy?"

I had been wrought up to such a pitch of suspense that the relief afforded by Number Two's explanation caused me—I am ashamed to say—to burst out into a silly bleat-like and hysterical laugh; but fortunately the guffaw at Number Five's expense was so general that my excitement passed unnoticed.

Then suddenly changing his tone to one of business-like directness, Number Two went on, in a hard, cold voice, in which I thought I detected an American twang,—

"See here, my friends—I happen to know the address to which our late chief was having his letters sent, and I have taken the liberty, as the senior member of this Council, of obtaining them, and bringing them along to-night. There they are, and you will see that there is a

tidy sum, which has come to hand in the way of subscriptions, to be shared among us. But I must point out to you that since our leader's death this Council has, so to speak, been living on its capital. He was a born organizer; and when he died he had got the machinery of all the various Leagues, Unions, Secret Societies, and Agitation Movements, which he directed, into such excellent working order, that everything has gone on almost automatically ever since. It is a good thing for us that it is so, for, as you are aware, no inconsiderable portion of the money that is subscribed finds its way into our pockets. But since he died we have really done nothing in return for the 'pickings' which come our way, and if subscriptions are to keep on coming in —and on that one point at least we are not likely to disagree—it is high time to do something to let our subscribers feel that they are getting their money's worth. Whatever that something is, it ought to be big—something that shall strike at the throne of England itself, and set every other throne in Europe trembling; some-

thing that will delight our friends and terrify our enemies, and set all the rest of the silly world agape like a pack of geese. And I think I've got it. Listen! This Jubilee, that is so soon to come off, has done our cause incalculable damage; it has sent sweeping to the very ends of the world such a wave of loyalty to the throne as perhaps has never passed over our planet before. Even that unutterable monkey on a stick, and poseur of poseurs, who so loves to play at soldiers, and have his portrait taken in uniform—the Emperor of Germany—sits securer on his throne to-day because of the Jubilee in England. It has strengthened the position of Monarchism immensely, and has put back the day of Democracy by a good fifty years. The picturesqueness of the thing and the sentiment of it—the Queen's being a woman and a widow, and all that—have turned the heads of even thoughtful people, and it wouldn't surprise me if Jubilee Day saw even the staid members of this Council waving their hats and yelling themselves hoarse with the rest of the populace.

"Well, gentlemen, to come to business. The Strand, as some of you know, is to be decorated with festoons of coloured celluloid balls stretched across the road. This will look pretty in daylight, and prettier at night, as each ball is really an electric lamp, and when they are all lit up the effect will be splendid. I've taken a certain house in the Strand for the occasion. I've engaged it for the night before the Jubilee and for Jubilee night as well, so that people that are nervous about the crowd (and I expect the crowd won't be a bad second to the Day of Judgment in the point of numbers) can sleep there before and after the event, and so see the show in comfort. And if any of you want to see something more exciting than the show, I think I can promise it, and I shall be happy to reserve seats. I've rented the roof of the house with the rest of it, and when it is quite dark I shall go up there on the night before the Jubilee. I shall take with me a certain celluloid ball, which looks exactly like those used for decorative purposes, but which in reality contains a deadly bomb,

so constructed that the slightest concussion will explode it. One end of the wire rope supporting the festoons of celluloid balls is secured to the roof of the house I have taken. This wire rope I shall undo, and slip my own celluloid bomb ball upon it, letting the thing slide down till it reaches the slackest part of the rope, which will, of course, be the centre, and so just over the middle of the road. There will be too much going on below for any one to notice that one of the many festoons along the Strand happens to have an extra ball; and if they do notice it they'll only suppose that it is one that has got out of its place. Well, when the show passes I shall be on the roof with a pair of sharp steel pincers, and at the precise moment when the Queen, surrounded by the royal princes, is passing under the festoons, I snip the wire, the bomb falls, and then—well, then I guess we snuff out the entire Royal Family at one wipe. How's that for high, gentlemen? I rather flatter myself it's pretty. Anyhow, it'll be the biggest and the tidiest thing in the way of a Royal assassination that history can

show. If you want me to put the thing through, say the word, and I'm your man. I guess it'll bring the subscriptions in at such a rate that we shall all be able to chuck conspiracy and retire into private life to spend the pieces. What do *you* say, gentlemen?"

"There's no need for us to say anything," sneered Councillor Number Five, who seemed determined to maintain an attitude of opposition to everything that Number Two had proposed. "You talk big enough for a houseful yourself. Don't you think all this blowing off would sound more to the purpose after the event than before it? Even a hen doesn't cackle till she's laid an egg."

"If you have formed any plan for striking a blow which is more likely to startle the world and to induce subscriptions," replied Number Two coldly, "I shall be happy to withdraw my proposal."

"I thought not," he went on when Number Five shook his head, "then in that case perhaps you will yourself undertake the carrying out of the plan

which I have had the honour to submit to the Council."

He stooped as he spoke, and lifting the brown bag, of which mention has already been made, opened it, and taking out a red celluloid ball he held it at arm's length to Number Five, who backed uneasily and stood staring at the thing with anything but eyes of desire.

"Won't you take it?" jeered Number Two, advancing a step. "It will be the simplest thing in the world now to carry out the arrangement. All you have to do is to slip the end of the wire through the ring at the top of the ball, and let it slide down till it reaches the slackest part. You see it is made exactly like the other coloured balls they are using, and no one could tell, without opening it, that it contained a bomb instead of an electric lamp. You are so anxious to serve the Council, and so ready with your criticisms, that no doubt you will be glad to accept the responsibility of stringing that pretty bead on its necklace, and cutting the wire at the critical moment. The man who undertakes the business may of course

lose his life in the explosion, or may be detected or arrested, as I fully recognised when I offered to play the part of Guy Faux. But I'm quite willing to resign in your favour, since you are so eager to distinguish yourself. The post of honour is always a post of danger—both in war and in conspiracy—but you, no doubt, won't count the cost so long as you gain the importance you so covet. Do you accept my offer?"

"No," said Number Five. "If your plan succeeds—though I don't think such a lot of it as you do—you'll take all the credit; and if it fails, as I believe it will, I shall have to pay the costs. Much obliged to you! No thanks! When I play Guy Faux, as you call it, it will have to be a plot of my own—not somebody else's—planning. You're not the only man on this Council with ideas, and if the other members would like me to think out a plan or two I'm ready to do it. But you've dealt out the cards in this little game of yours, and now you'd best play your hand out. All the same, and to show that it isn't funk that keeps

me out of it, I'm quite ready to act as your assistant in this Jubilee business, and to share whatever risk you run in it."

"It is quite true that I ought to have an assistant," replied Number Two coldly. "The wire rope which I have to undo will be very heavy, and I shall need some one to hold it for me while I thread the ball; for if by any chance the thing slipped out of my hand the result would be too previous to be pleasant. But if you will pardon my saying so, I would rather that some other member than yourself volunteered to assist me. You have already expressed your disbelief in the success of my project; and it does not do to have half-hearted workers in such a business. We are already half-way to victory when every one concerned is confident of success, and, conversely, we are half-way to a failure when one of the workers anticipates break-down. Besides, though I am not very superstitious, something tells me that your presence on the occasion would bring us ill luck. Is any other member of the Council willing to

assist me in the great blow I am about to strike?"

Here was my chance.

"I am," I said.

As I spoke I stepped forward and raised my right hand in military salute—why, I cannot think, unless the whole thing seemed to me less like real life than a melodrama in which I was sustaining a part. The action, however, appeared to please him.

"That's good," he said. "A soldier, too, and accustomed to act under orders without asking questions. Your number?"

"Number Seven," I replied promptly, as if on parade.

"All right, Number Seven. Here's the exact address of the house in question. Can I count on your calling there at nine o'clock sharp on the evening before the Jubilee?"

"You can, sir," I said.

"All right. Remember. Nine o'clock sharp the night before the show. Give three single knocks and I'll open the door to you myself. That's all I need say to you now, I think."

Taking this as my dismissal, I saluted in silence and stepped back.

Then Number Two turned to the rest of the company again. "There is one point that I ought to bring to your notice, gentlemen," he said. "It was a rule of our late chief's that the Council never met in the same place twice. This is the second time that this wagon has been our trysting-place, and though I have no reason to suppose it is not perfectly safe, I think we should do well to make a change. There is a disused shed in some brick-fields adjoining the cemetery at Tarborough. The town is fairly near London, and there are three different lines of railway. Let us arrange to meet there the night after the Jubilee. If the little surprise packet which I have arranged for the Queen and the Royal Family achieves its purpose, and I receive no personal injury and can slip away in the confusion, I shall be at the shed at midnight the day after to meet you. If I am either killed or taken you'll have read about it in the papers, and must make your arrangements for the conduct of the

business without me. One thing I can promise you—that should I be taken, your secret will be safe with me. Were I to be captured red-handed in an attempt to assassinate the Queen on the one day of all days when the poor fools who call themselves her loyal subjects will consider her person as sacred, the chances are ten to one that I get lynched on the spot. But even if the police can prevent that, and get me safely away, no power on earth can save my neck from the hangman. And rest assured that I shan't try to save it by playing my comrades false. Whoever turns traitor, I shan't. We meet again, fellow-councillors, at Tarborough, at the place I have told you of, and at midnight on the day after the Jubilee. Don't fail to turn up punctually on the night before, Number Seven. I shall need your assistance. I think that's all; so now we can adjourn this meeting and get to bed."

CHAPTER X

DEVILRY ON A HOUSE-TOP

It was striking nine when on the night before the Jubilee I knocked three times at the door of the house where I had promised to meet my fellow-conspirator.

I had not wasted the two or three days that intervened between the last council meeting and the great pageant, for in the wide, deep under-pocket of the cape which I wore over my evening dress I was carrying a celluloid ball of the same pattern as that which had been shown to us in the gipsy wagon by Number Two. It had not been a difficult matter to discover the maker of these articles. From him I obtained one of the same colour as that in the possession of Number Two, and had filled it with sawdust and sand, in the hope that I might find an opportunity of substituting it for the deadly weapon with which Number Two

intended, as he put it, to "snuff out the entire Royal Family at one wipe."

The reader may be inclined to ask if it is not curious that success so often attended my little stratagems for the spoiling of the conspirators' plans, but I can assure him that it is surprisingly easy to fool a knave. No one is so capable of being tricked as your trickster, for he is so accustomed to suspecting everybody that he has long ago lost the God-given instinct which warns an honest man when to be on his guard. I would rather any day set my wits against a knave's than against an honest man's. Your knave is so busy in fooling you that he has eyes only for his own plans; whereas the honest man's eyes are upon you all the time, and you get no chance to spy out the weak places in his armour.

All the same, I fully realized that it was more than possible I might find no opportunity of effecting the change of balls,—my sand and sawdust-stuffed plaything for Number Two's deadly bomb,—in which case I had made up my mind to inform the police of the devilry

which was hatching, and to have the villainous thing removed without an hour's delay.

But, being by no means desirous of making a Police Commissioner my father confessor, I was determined to do my best to frustrate unaided the proposed assassination; and so long as one can keep one's nerve and one's presence of mind, it is surprisingly easy, as I have said, to induce a rogue to tumble into the trap which one has laid for him.

The sound of my three raps had scarcely died away before the door was opened by Number Two, who looked at my expanse of shirt-front and carefully tied white bow with an unconcealed sneer.

"That's a nice costume to come through these crowded streets in," he said. "Been dining with your relative, the King of Ireland? You Irishmen are all related to kings, aren't you?"

'No," I replied, wondering how he had discovered my nationality, for, having been educated in England, I haven't the least suspicion of a brogue; "it was one of *your* royal relatives—the King of Dark-

ness. He sent his remembrances, and hopes soon to see you settled for good in his establishment."

He laughed, and when the door was closed said: "That's not half so pressing an invitation as you and I are going to send to the Royal Family of England. Come along up on the roof, and let's get to business."

Up on the roof we went accordingly, and I looked over the parapet and saw below me, in the garish glare of the illuminations, the vast and packed multitudes, that, with elbows and shoulders at work, wedged their way along, grinning, gaping, singing, and cheering good-naturedly, in spite of their perspiring bodies and dust-choked throats. Then I lifted my head and looked up to the vaster and voiceless multitudes of stars above, and as I did so the whole scene seemed to me like part of some strange dream-drama.

"Now, my friend, we must be very careful," said Number Two, "for if by any chance you stumbled and kicked against this thing, or I should let it drop,

there wouldn't be enough of either of us left for our own mothers to identify us by at the inquest."

As he spoke he put down the bag which he had been carrying, and opening it carefully, took out with both hands the red celluloid ball which he had exhibited to us in the wagon.

"The end of the wire rope supporting the festoons is fastened to the Venetian masts—not to the house, after all," he said. "But I watched my time a couple of nights ago when no one was passing, and tossed a ball of stout black thread—the end of which I secured here—over the middle of that farther festoon. Then I went out into the road and tossed the ball round and round the festoons several times, till it was firmly caught in the decorations, and then I chucked the ball up on this roof again. It took me a long time to arrange it, for people were constantly passing, but by watching my opportunity I managed the business all right. So now we have a line direct from here to the centre of the festoon, so that I can cut the thread and let the

bomb down when the old lady passes without disturbing the rest of the decorations.

"The end of the thread is tied to that rail. Will you go and untie it, and hold the thread ready for me to string on? But don't let go when you have it undone, or everything will be spoilt. There will be people passing in the street the whole of to-night, and I should get no chance of fixing up another line."

For an instant I hesitated. Should I untie the thread and let the cord slip from my hand, as if by accident, and so baulk him of his murderous purpose? Another moment's thought, however, convinced me that so clumsy and transparent an artifice was not advisable. It would, in the first place, arouse Number Two's suspicions, and might not, after all, avert the catastrophe I feared; for he was a man of resource, who would not be at a loss to devise some other method for carrying out his devilry.

So, under the pretence of trying to undo the fastening, I pulled it into an inextricable knot, at which I fumbled so

long that, as I had hoped, Number Two lost patience.

"Confound it all!" he growled. "If I had thought you were so clumsy a fool, I'd have had that other man to help me, after all. Here, come out of the way and let me do it! The thing's easy enough, if you only go about it the right way."

This was the sequel which I had been leading up to and hoping for, so I stepped back accordingly, and he took my place.

As I had intended, he found the task a teaser. "You have made a mess of it, and no mistake!" he snarled between his set teeth, as he bent over the tangle in a vain attempt to loosen the knot, at which I had tugged to such good purpose.

No sooner was his back turned than I took the sand and sawdust-stuffed ball out of the pocket that was hidden in my cape, and placing it noiselessly on the ground, transferred the bomb to my pocket.

"Have you got a knife?" inquired Number Two a few seconds after I had effected the exchange.

"Yes," I said. "Do you want it?"

"Yes. Open it and cut the string just above my hand while I hold on to it. That's right. Now bring that ball—carefully, for God's sake! and we'll string her on. Hold hard. Don't let go till I tell you. That's all right. There it goes—sliding down the string like a good 'un. You see, it's stopped just over the centre of the road, ready to drop in and make a morning call on Her Majesty when she's passing. Now I'll fasten the thread to the rail again. Then all will be in order for to-morrow, and you can go back and pay another visit to your royal relatives."

CHAPTER XI

HOW A GREAT NATIONAL CATASTROPHE WAS AVERTED ON JUBILEE DAY

Being desirous of seeing the play out, I had secured—at a reasonable enough price—a front seat in the top window of the house exactly opposite to that from the roof of which Number Two hoped, with one snip of his "abhorred shears," to "slit the thin-spun life" of the Royal Family of England.

The morning of the Jubilee saw me take up my place—not this time in my councillor's disguise — in my allotted seat, whence I watched with no little curiosity for the final act in what was meant to be a tragedy, but which I had been the means of transforming into a farce.

Number Two was not astir as early as I was, and did not put in an appearance on the roof until the tail of the great proces-

sion was in sight. Meanwhile I sat looking down on the stalwart fellows who went swinging along at quick march on foot, or upon the stately pacing and prancing of the cavalry that passed, clattering and jingling, in pursuing lines.

My enjoyment of the pageant was, however, considerably marred by the constant growling of a man sitting near me, whose natural moroseness of disposition was accentuated by the fact that he was dissatisfied with his seat.

"Who wants to see a lot of Court flunkeys riding in double rows or driving in carriages?" he grumbled. "That's what most of 'em are, you know. It's bad enough for the nation to 'ave to pay for their keep—royal keep too—and pay 'em big salaries for doing nothing, without our 'aving 'em stuck up on a 'orse or in a fine carriage for us to 'ave to pay to see 'em go by. If you and me was dressed up in those fine uniforms and 'ad 'orses found for us to ride on, we'd look just as fine men as they. Isn't that so, mister?"

"Oh, yes," I said, "it is quite possible."

"There you are, then. And who *are*

they, after all? That's what *I* want to know."

"Who, indeed?" I made answer.

"Now if they'd asked *me*," he went on, as though he had rather expected they would have done so, and felt aggrieved by the oversight, "if they'd 'ave asked me, I'd 'ave said, What you want is all the great people in the Queen's reign—them as is living, of course. They 'ave got Roberts and Wolseley, and quite right too, but where's Gladstone, and Rosebery, and Dr. Parker, and W. G.? There's the President of the Royal Academy and all the big doctors? Ain't *they* done a precious sight more good than all your flunkeys and princes? Princes! We've got too many of 'em as it is. There's 'Enry Irving, and Wilson Barrett, and 'All Caine, and Marie Corelli, and George R. Sims, and Penley, and Stanley? They ain't 'ere—leastwise, not in the show. I tell you if they'd asked me"—with another splutter of resentment—"I could 'ave told 'em who to put in."

"Yes, there's a great deal in what you say," I said, thinking it wiser to agree

with him than to add fuel to the fire of his grievance by a dispute.

"All the same," put in a man of conciliatory countenance who sat behind me, "all the same, you can't deny that it's an imposing sight."

"It's imposing enough as a 'ole," admitted the iconoclast, "but if you look at it separate-like, it's only a lot of 'uman beings like you and me dressed up in uniforms and riding by on 'orses. But, 'Ullo! Why, I'll be jiggered if there ain't Freddy 'Opkins—'im as married my cousin—a-riding by in the Lancers! That's 'im on the white 'orse with the black moustache. Fred — O! Fred 'Opkins! How are you, Freddy? See, 'e's a-looking this way. What yer Fred! How goes it, sonny? See 'im nod? He looked up and nodded, 'e did. Now 'e *is* what I call a fine-looking chap. Fancy 'is being 'ere too! Well, I'm jiggered! I must tell 'em at 'ome as I see Fred 'Opkins in the percession, and that he looked up and nodded—not a bit proud like."

Just at this moment the sound of dis-

tant cheering from the west increased perceptibly in volume. It was no longer mere cheering, but the almost frenzied shout of a multitude swayed by some great emotion. It was contagious. It seemed to run along the lines like kindling fire. It grew nearer—hoarser—louder—till it was almost upon us. Leaning forward with outstretched head, I looked westward along the Strand. The great street itself seemed palpitating with excitement. The houses seemed to resemble avenues of trees, every leaf of which was a human being, all quivering—like the leaves of a forest in a storm—under some supreme agitation.

And then, amid a whirling of waving hands and fluttering handkerchiefs, a string of carriages swept by. No one stayed to notice the mechanical, almost automatic, backward and forward swaying of the royal Princesses. Even the Prince, the ever-popular Prince, was deemed scarce worthy a glance by the eager, hungry eyes that sought only the one central figure of that little lonely old woman who sat there, queenly of mien,

and none the less queenly because on that sadly-smiling face, so schooled to royal self-possession, the look of trembling wonderment—almost of fear—told how deeply moved was that widowed woman-heart.

"Queen! Queen! God bless her! God save her!" burst from many thousand throats. With the cries ringing in my ears I switched my eyes upward—not without an effort—and looking across at Number Two, I saw that he was in the act of cutting the thread.

Something fell, harmless and unseen, or, at all events, unnoticed, amid the uproar and excitement. Once more I turned my eyes upon the street and leaned out of the window with craned head. I caught a peep of a parasol, had a glimpse of the patient and beautiful, but coldly impassive and wearied, face of the Princess of Wales, and then the cavalry closed in behind the carriages, and the great pageant was already a thing of the past.

I drew in my head once more and glanced across at Number Two, who was

staring blankly, even stupidly, at the spot where the ineffectual ball had fallen.

Suddenly the fact that some one was looking at him—that at that moment, when every other head but his own was turned eastward for a last glimpse of the Queen, one person's eyes were fixed upon him—seemed in some way to make itself known to his consciousness. His own eyes swept the opposite house like a searchlight, and in another moment I saw that they were fixed upon mine. As I felt their fire concentrating, so to speak, upon me, some instinct prompted me to make myself look as little like myself as possible. In the hope of masking my real personality and of preventing him from identifying me, I raised my shoulders almost to my ears, and dropped my jaw, so as to give new character, or want of character, to my mouth. Then I drew back from his sight into the crowd.

"Did he recognise me?" I said to myself. "God knows, I don't. But whether he did or not, I have at least the satisfac-

tion of knowing that I have been instrumental in averting a great catastrophe, and in preventing this day of national rejoicing from being turned into a day of national mourning."

CHAPTER XII

EXIT COUNCILLOR NUMBER FIVE

The next meeting of the council was arranged to take place, as the reader will remember, in a disused shed that stood on the brickfields near the cemetery at Tarborough. There we were to assemble at midnight, and thither I accordingly betook myself at the appointed hour.

It was not a cheerful spot. Though fairly roomy, the building was a mere shed. For what use it had originally been intended I cannot say. There was neither fireplace nor window. It consisted merely of four wooden walls, a roof and a clay floor. A grave could not have been barer, for from floor to ceiling there wasn't so much as a nail on which to hang one's hat. Some one had improvised a candlestick by jabbing the sharp point of a big pocket-knife into the wall. The knife had a flat double-edge

blade, upon which there stood a guttering candle-end, which was our only light.

As soon as the circle was complete, Number Two, who was the last to arrive, took up his place by the candle; perhaps that he might better see the faces of his comrades, perhaps because he fancied that nearness, even to this miserable emblem, constituted the place of precedence in the assembly.

"Fellow-councillors," he said, "I am here as promised to report progress, but I regret to say, as you must already have assumed, that there is no progress to report. Our glorious Jubilee scheme has failed, not for want of care on my part, but because there has been a traitor in our midst. The more I think of it, the more irresistibly am I forced to that conclusion. Gentlemen, how did our late chief, Number One, meet his death? We took it for granted—and I admit that I took it for granted—that the irreparable loss which the society sustained by his removal was the result of an accident. But does it not strike some of you as strange that, ever since that lamentable

accident, things have gone wrong with us, and that some power seems to have been at work whose object apparently is to pull the linch-pin out of our most carefully planned projects? What about the unaccountable occurrence in connection with the punishment which we proposed to mete out to Lord Cranthorpe? Was *that* the result of another accident, or was it the deliberate foiling of our schemes by some one who knows our secrets? And now what about the Jubilee fiasco? I pledge you my word, brother councillors, that the project was carried out exactly as I had planned it. The celluloid ball, containing an explosive so deadly and so sure that a smart rap with the finger end would have sufficed to explode it, was hung, as I promised you it should be hung, exactly over the spot where the Queen was to pass. And as she went by, I, with my own hand, cut the thread and saw the ball fall to the ground, scarcely a yard behind her carriage. What was the result? A miserable failure! But why? Because the ball had been tampered with. Because we have been fooled. Instead of

coming here to-night flushed with success and proud to receive your congratulations, I am here feeling like and looking like a fool. And only because of treachery, black, hell-damned treachery!"

He stopped, speechless with passion, and glared around the assembly like a madman. As for myself, the very heart of me went down into my boots. No doubt his next word would be to denounce me. If, as he said, and said rightly, he had been fooled, and the ball had been tampered with, by whom could it have been done but by the councillor who had volunteered to assist him—myself, the so-called and supposed Number Seven?

It was true that they had been fooled, but who was so great a fool as the man who had hugged himself for his own cleverness and had laughed at the conspirators as his dupes, and yet had been so blind as not to know that in coming there that night he was deliberately putting his head into a noose of his own making? But if I was to die I would at least sell my life dearly. Even while Number Two had been speaking, I had sought

the pocket where lay my revolver. The next instant would have seen me whip the weapon out, and indeed my finger was already on the trigger, when a derisive laugh from one of the party stayed my hand.

The laugh came from Number Five—the man who, either from jealousy or because he was himself ambitious of being elected to fill the post of the dead leader, had all along endeavoured to throw cold water upon Number Two's projects.

"The old story!" he said contemptuously. "Every clumsy bungler, who makes a mess of what he has undertaken, tries to excuse himself by putting the blame on somebody else. You remind me of a school-boy, who when he is fairly beaten in a game calls out 'Cheat! Cheat!' Why don't you admit that you've failed, and have done with it."

I was thankful for any diversion which turned to another quarter the attention which I had anticipated was soon to be centred upon myself, and I took the opportunity which the respite afforded of edging cautiously towards the door,

While I was doing so Number Two's reply came cold and clear:—

"Fellow councillors, the traitor among us stands self-revealed. When the bomb which ought to have destroyed the Royal Family fell harmlessly in the road-way, and while I was standing there gnashing my teeth with rage, I felt instinctively that some one person was watching me when every other eye in the assembly was fixed upon the show. I know instinctively if I am watched, even when the watcher is behind me, and my eyes went straight to the watching person on this occasion. He was sitting on a stand—had chosen that place, no doubt, that he might gratify his jealous hate by being a witness of my discomfiture—exactly opposite. When he saw that I had discovered him he drew back out of sight among the crowd, but not before I had seen that he was long-faced and high-shouldered. Look at the man who has just spoken, the man who is trying to belittle me in your eyes because he fears that you will elect me to the post that he hankers for himself. Look at him, I say, and see whether he is

the man I have described or not. He thinks, no doubt, that he is safe because he is wearing the beard which we all wear, and had none when I caught sight of him on Jubilee Day. But he has shown his hand too plainly on this occasion. I told you that there was a traitor in our midst, and he stands there!"

Here was a curious throw of Fate's dice indeed! Little did I think on Jubilee Day, when some instinct of self-preservation caused me to seek to disguise my identity from Number Two by humping my shoulders and dropping my jaw, that I was unconsciously mimicking one of the Syndicate of Scoundrels, and so probably saving my own life.

Before I could ask myself whether it would not be a cowardly thing to shelter myself under so curious an accident and to let another man be made answerable for my action, Number Five had leapt forward and confronted his accuser.

"Liar!" he screamed, almost hysterically. "Coward and liar! take that!"

As he spoke his hand darted towards the knife in the wall, which was doing

duty as a candlestick. I saw him clutch the handle and wrench the weapon from its place, and then as the candle fell and we were plunged in total darkness, he sprang upon Number Two with upraised blade.

In the second before the candle went out I had seen the other conspirators start forward instinctively with outstretched hands to stay the descending knife; and for the next few seconds the picture so formed remained on my retina like a *tableau vivant*, in which, as if Time's pendulum had suddenly stopped, we see action frozen in a moment's space into inaction, life caught and fixed in an instant to still life. Then, as the picture thus imprinted on the retina lifted rigidly and edged anglewise away until it swam and dissolved out of ken in an upper corner of the shed, I seemed to see the succeeding and inclosing darkness writhing around me like the coils of two huge wrestling and intertwining black snakes; I heard the scuffle of feet as the two combatants swayed backward and forward on the floor; there was a cry, the thud of

a falling body; and the next instant some one struck a match.

The picture that presented itself was exactly like that I have seen in melodramas, when the curtain, which has fallen upon some tragic situation, lifts for a moment to allow the spectators another glimpse of the ghastly sight.

Number Two—his tie and collar torn open and hanging loose—was leaning back white-faced and panting against the door, looking almost stupidly at a gaping cut across the palm of his right hand. The others were bending over Number Five, who lay on his back upon the floor, his features twitching and working horribly, while his nerveless hands fumbled at the handle of a knife which was buried up to the hilt in his throat.

I have said that the whole scene reminded me of a "curtain" from a transpontine melodrama, and the stageness of the situation was sustained by the subsequent introduction of the inevitable "comic relief."

The man who held the match was bending over the body on the floor, and

the other conspirators had naturally drawn as close to him as possible, in their eagerness to see what had happened or to render help. Suddenly the man who was holding the match dropped it with a yell.

"Damn your clumsy, clumping feet!" he roared, as he stumped backward and forward whistling with pain. "Here am I with an ingrowing nail that has given me hell and Old Harry for weeks, and you must needs go set your hobnail hoof upon it."

"Beg pardon, I'm sure," answered a voice from the darkness.

"Beg pardon be damned!" came the reply. "A man's no right to bring feet like those among gentlemen. They're only fit to hire out, instead of steam-rollers, to crush stones on a country road."

In the meantime another match had been struck, and the man with the ingrowing nail found another grievance.

"Be damned if he ain't standing on the candle with 'em now," he grumbled. "Here, move 'em, will you, if you can do it without knocking anybody down.

You'll kill some one before you've done, if we don't have a light. I feel like a black-beetle on a kitchen floor, I do, when you're walking about with those boots on."

"Is he hurt?" asked some one, when the candle had been rescued and relit, and attention was once more turned to the prostrate man upon the floor.

"No, he ain't hurt; he's only dead, that's what he is," said the fellow with the ingrowing nail, whose number on the Council I subsequently discovered was Number Six. "It would take a power o' hurting to trouble a man who's wearing a necktie like that. You might as well talk of hurting a skewered chicken."

"Gentlemen," said Number Two, "you are my witnesses that I struck in self-defence. It was he who drew steel on me, not I on him. Besides, even if this hadn't happened, the necks of none of us would have been safe if he had been allowed to leave this place alive to-night. How he did it I don't know, but there's no question but that it was he who changed the ball that I had prepared for

Jubilee Day. I saw him with my own eyes sitting in the building exactly opposite. And what would have been easier for a man who knew our plans, and had the run of the building opposite, than to play tricks with the other end of the festoon upon which the ball was hung? No doubt, after I had fixed the bomb and gone away, he managed to lasso it in some fashion and then haul it up and change it. If you remember I invited him to assist me in carrying out the project. But he was too clever for that. He knew that if anything went wrong I should naturally suspect him (and, in fact, I *was* inclined at first to suspect Number Seven, who assisted me) and so, after this fellow had acquainted himself with my proposed plan, he goes and instals himself in the building that faced my headquarters, so that he can spoil the game without incurring suspicion. It was very prettily planned, and, no doubt, if we knew the truth the poor man who went to his account over that attempt on Lord Cranthorpe was a victim of this same Judas's treachery."

As he spoke he spurned the body on the floor with his foot.

It seemed to stir.

"Damme! I don't believe he's dead, after all," said Councillor Number Six. Kneeling down and placing one hand on the prostrate man's shoulder, he began to undo the buttons of the waistcoat.

"Umph!" he grunted. "There's a pound or two of stiff horsehair padding in the man's shoulders. You can feel it jutting out where the coat joins the sleeve. Wanted to make himself look broad and military, I suppose. A rum fancy. Now let's see if his heart's going." Opening the shirt at the collar, he slipped an open palm over the victim's left breast.

Then he sprang to his feet with a startled cry. "My God! mates," he said. "It isn't a man at all, but a woman!"

"A woman!" chorussed the conspirators.

"Yes, it is a woman right enough!" said the fellow. He stood for a moment or two staring meditatively at the body, and then, with eyes narrowed to slits, he

looked curiously at each of us in turn, as if expecting to find on one of our faces something which might indicate a previous knowledge of the victim's sex. In this he was disappointed, for I watched the faces of the others meanwhile, and could detect no such sign as he sought.

This, in fact, was hardly to be wondered at under the circumstances. Some physiognomists tell you that if you suspect a man of lying, or an enemy of flinching, you should look him in the eyes. Do so by all means, but better still, watch his mouth. Many men will brazen it out boldly with their eyes, but all their hardihood cannot quite control the traitor mouth from betraying secrets to those who can read the signs aright. Several times eyes have looked unwaveringly into mine, as if steadied by the consciousness of truth, even while the word "liar" was plainly written on the lips.

On the occasion of which I am writing, the lips of those present were hidden by the false beards and moustaches which we wore, and physiognomy (I never yet met a man or woman who did not plume him-

self, or herself, on being an adept in that science) was disadvantaged thereby. But, if the expression counts for anything, one and all were taken aback and bewildered by the surprise which had been sprung upon them regarding the victim's sex.

"Did you know it was a woman?" asked the man who had made the discovery, wheeling round sharply upon Number Two.

"Indeed I did not," was the calm but decisive reply. "The possibilities of such a thing never as much as occurred to me. But what you say about her shoulders being padded goes to prove that I was right in accusing this person of having played tricks with my plan for celebrating the Jubilee. I distinctly said that the man I saw watching me was high-shouldered as well as long-faced."

"Do you think the chief knew this person was a woman?" inquired the man who had constituted himself spokesman.

"He must have done so. Each member of the council was selected by him, and was known to him personally. No doubt

he had good reason for what he did. In fact, if you think of it, there were one or two little affairs planned by him and carried out under his superintendence that, if we had thought of it at all, we might have known only a woman could have worked successfully. All the same, if I'd suspected we had a woman amongst us, I'm afraid I should have funked the whole business. The woman isn't born yet, and never will be born, that I'd trust my neck to. Sooner or later they're bound to play you false. I've known a good many bad men in my time—men who were sensual as hogs and as cruel as tigers—but the biggest brute of a man living couldn't stoop to the black treachery that some women are capable of. And they can be as treacherous to the man who's faithful to them and works his fingers to the bone for them, as they can to the blackguard that kicks them to death with hob-nailed boots. I tell you what it is, my friends, it's lucky for us we have made this discovery while our necks were safe. Some one has been playing us false ever since our chief died

(and we don't know that somebody didn't play him false, and that he wouldn't have been among us to-day but for that same somebody). But there lies the traitor, beyond all doubt, and you see if things don't work better with us now that the Judas who has been trying to circumvent us is out of the way."

No one dissenting from this view of the case, Councillor Number Two dropped his platform manner, and addressed himself to the practical side of the question.

"Well, my friends," he said, "we don't stop now to argue whether I'm right or whether I'm wrong. Let's have that wig and beard off. It's possible some of us may be able to identify this woman." He plucked off the disguise as he spoke, and then staggered back, his face grown grey as putty, the pupils of his eyes unnaturally dilated, and his breath coming in short, quick inspirations.

"My God!" he gasped; "and I've killed her!"

"Yes," said Number Six; "the job goes down in your account right enough, my friend. You make yourself easy about

that. There's no one here would be so mean as to want to do you out of it."

The taunt passed unheeded, if not unheard, for, to the dismay, and probably to the disgust, of the onlookers, Number Two, scoundrel though he was, knelt down beside the corpse with a look on his face that seemed strangely out of keeping in that company.

Councillor Number Six was apparently not a sentimental person.

"H'm!" he sneered. "First we stick a knife into folk, and then we do the handkerchief business over 'em. Seems to me this syndicate ought to turn itself into an Amalgamated Murder and Mourner Company combined. 'Murders committed on the shortest notice; funerals to match; tears always in stock. If you don't see the kind of corpse you'd like in the window, step inside and ask for another. No extra charge for handkerchiefs.' "

He spoke to unlistening ears, as far as Number Two was concerned; seeing which the fellow slapped the kneeling man on the shoulder noisily. "Cheer up, my buck!" he said; "you had a lot to say

against women just now, but you seem mighty low down all at once because one of 'em's met with an accident."

"Yes," answered Number Two, rising and looking around weariedly; "I've a good deal to say against them, as you observe, and that particular one has a good deal to say against me, if she could say it."

"You've taken good care she can't," sneered the other. "But, look here, my friend. It strikes me that that lady came here meaning mischief. When a woman wants to make it nasty for a man, she ain't too particular if she makes it nasty for his mates too. That's the worst of a woman. When she's set on a thing she goes at it blind. Now we don't institute too rigorous an investigation into the moral character of those who have seats on this council,—not too rigorous, that is,—but we hope, for the sake of all our peace of mind, not to say our necks, that there aren't any other ladies who want to get equal with you. Otherwise we might have old Jonah on board at once."

"I don't think you need fear any further trouble of the sort," answered Number Two, with a mirthless smile. Then he turned to address the company more generally:—

"I had a proposal to submit to you to-night, gentlemen, but perhaps it will be best for all our safety if we get out of this place as soon as possible, and out of sight of"—he hesitated a moment, gulped at something in his throat, like one suffering from physical sickness, and then, as if impatient of his weakness, pointed deliberately at the corpse—"of that. With your permission we'll postpone this meeting. It won't be safe to meet here again, especially after what's happened. I know it's desirable to change the place of meeting as often as possible, but for the present I'm absolutely positive that the gipsy wagon at Leigh is safe. Let us all meet there at midnight the day after to-morrow. Do you agree?"

"Yes, we agree," said Councillor Number Six. "But first we must get rid of the body. Is there a pond handy? If we button a brick under the coat so that it

can't slip out, and pack the pocket with stones, she'd keep down all right."

"There is no pond anywhere near," said Number Two, with a curiously hard note in his voice. "But I'm answerable for the woman's death, and I'll be answerable for the disposal of the body. The fact is, my friends, I came here to-night determined that the person who played us false should pay the price of his treachery. And when I've made up my mind to a certain course of action I make my preparations beforehand accordingly. That's the only way to carry a crime through successfully. It's your criminal who does things in a hurry who plays into the hands of the police. Sometimes unforeseen circumstances compel one to act in a hurry, and I rather flatter myself I'm as good as most people in an emergency. But, as I say, I prefer to take my time to fix things up scientifically. I knew that there'd be a body to dispose of to-night, for I knew that when you had heard what I had to tell you, you would decide that the person who has played us false should not leave here alive. That person didn't

come by his, or rather her, death in the way I had intended. I'd arranged a much surer and comparatively safe method of doing the painful business. But the thing has been taken out of my hand, as you all know, and we needn't discuss it. Nor need we trouble ourselves about the body. I came here, as I said, knowing that there would be a body to dispose of, and it was my duty, therefore, to look round the place and make the necessary arrangements beforehand. They are quite simple. I've been in the cemetery close by to-day, and I see that they have been digging a grave ready for a funeral to-morrow. It's a deep grave, and if we lay the body at the bottom and put enough earth over to cover it, no one is likely to notice that the grave is slightly shallower. It is surprising the little notice people take of things, unless, of course, they have a reason for being suspicious. You'll find that the coffin will be let down on the body there to-morrow, the service read, and the grave filled in without any living soul suspecting that they have hidden away our ugly secret for us. If some

one will volunteer to lend me a hand, we'll have the whole thing done in a quarter of an hour. Who will do so? There's practically no risk. What do you say, Number Seven? You and I worked all right together in the Jubilee business. Do you feel like throwing in your lot with me again?"

For one moment I hesitated. Notwithstanding his assurance that the minimum of risk was practically nil, I foresaw that were anything unforeseen to upset his calculation I might as a result find myself in the dock on a charge of murder. As a matter of fact I was beginning to realize the tremendous responsibility I had taken upon myself when I first embarked on this venture. What I ought then to have done was to inform the police of the facts which had come to my knowledge while I was secreted in the fo'castle of the *Sea Swallow*, so that they might have surrounded the meeting-place of the conspirators at Leigh and effected the arrest of the rascally gang. Were individual members of the community, to whose cognizance the actual committal

or the proposed committal of a crime has come, to constitute themselves, as I did, private detectives, the results would be deplorable. My own plea is that I entered upon the business thoughtlessly and while the itch for adventure was on me, and that once having become involved I saw no way out at present.

Even while Number Two was speaking that adventurous spirit stirred again within me. Sooner or later the psychological moment would come for calling in the police, and bringing the ruffians, red-handed, to justice. Until that psychological moment arrived I preferred to steer clear of Scotland Yard and to do my detective work after my own methods.

By falling in with Number Two's proposal I might learn something important about the personality of the man who was practically the leader of the gang. That decided me. I opened my mouth to say, "Yes, I will do as you wish," but before I could do so Councillor Number Six forced himself to the front and said roughly,—"Come along, guv'nor. I'm your man. And now let's get to business."

"Thank you," replied Number Two. "Then, gentlemen, I need detain the rest of you no further. The day after to-morrow we meet at midnight at the old place. Good-night."

CHAPTER XIII

A BIT OF "BOUNCE" THAT SENT SIX POLICEMEN OFF ON A FALSE SCENT

As he spoke we heard the grating of wheels on the shingly high-road that skirted the cemetery. In an instant Number Two had blown out the candle and opened the door softly.

It was a bright moonlight night, and we could distinctly see a trap, from which seven men got out noiselessly. They stood a moment, and then, in obedience to a muffled word of command, each produced something that, from the way in which the moonlight glanced upon it, appeared to be polished metal.

"Don't move, any one, on your life," said Number Two, in an imperative whisper. "We're betrayed, and by that woman; but I see a way out of it. I'm going to bluff them. It's the only way. I'm going to send all but one or two of them—all but one if I can manage it—

off on a wild goose chase. The one that's left I shall find an excuse to bring in here. The instant he crosses the door you must 'down' him. One crushing blow on the head first, and then finish him off while he's unconscious. Now, I'm going out to them to pretend I'm the informer. It's an impudent bit of bluff, but it's our only chance. Even if it fails, we shan't be any the worse off than we were."

As he spoke he ran forward to meet the advancing constables.

"Why are you so late?" he called out excitedly. "They're gone. Four of them drove off in a trap ten minutes ago, along the road there, to catch the midnight express from Stolby. I wouldn't leave here for fear of missing you, but I wish you'd come earlier. The other has gone to catch the last train up from here. If one of you comes with me we can secure him all right. Two of us will be enough for that job. Hadn't the rest of you better drive after the other four? You'll be six to four, but remember they're armed. If you are quick about it, you'll get to Stolby station as soon as

they will. But there's not an instant to lose. If they catch that train they'll be in London before you can telegraph, and the game'll be up."

It was, as he said, an "impudent bluff," but it succeeded, as impudence often does.

"Tumble in, lads. Sharp as you can. I wouldn't miss 'em for a thousand pounds," yelled the man in command of the constables. "You stay with him, as he suggests, Brown, and secure the fifth man. We'll get the other four right enough. But don't let the informer there get out of your sight, mind. His evidence is too valuable to run the risk of losing it."

The boldness of Number Two's ruse and the unsuspecting way in which the police had "tumbled" to it fairly took my breath away. Before I had got it back, the trap containing the six defenders of the peace was tearing along the Stolby road like a fire-engine.

"They'll catch them all right," said Number Two gleefully to the constable who had been told off to assist him in the

capture of the conspirator who was supposed to have gone to Tarborough station. "And now you and I'll make sure of the other man. We'll have the whole six of them safely lodged in stone walls to-night. Come along—there's no time to lose. If one of 'em's left at large, my life wouldn't be worth a moment's purchase when they know who's turned informer. But stop a minute; my bag's in the shed, and as it contains the documents that prove their guilt, the inspector there won't thank us for leaving it behind us. I'll run back and get it."

"Not without me," said the constable knowingly. "My instructions were not to lose sight of you, my friend; and though it's all square, I've no doubt, I'm bound to obey instructions."

"Oh, come, by all means," said Number Two indifferently.

"Yes, I mean to," was the policeman's answer, as he took his companion's arm.

The words were the last he uttered, for, as he stooped his head to enter the shed, Number Six, who was standing in the shadow of the door, struck him a

terrific blow with a brick he had snatched up from the floor.

It crushed in the poor devil's skull as easily as a tap from a spoon crushes the shell of an egg, and he went down without a cry.

"That'll do," said Number Two. "You did it quite scientifically, my friend. Now, gentlemen, I think we'd better make ourselves scarce. We shall not have time to attend to this lady's funeral service, after all. You're satisfied now, I hope, that it is this woman who was the traitor. It's a lucky thing for us it was so. If a man was going to turn informer he'd have taken care to do the thing properly, and to have taken time about it, not have gone in some hysterical moment to a set of booby country bobbies. She could only have laid information just before the meeting, or they'd have telegraphed to town, and got the London detectives down. Those who came were all Tarborough men. And now I'm going to take you all in my confidence. It isn't safe for us to try to get away from here to-night. That's why I

bluffed the bobbies, instead of showing fight or making a run for it. There's no train we could catch now, and, even if we could do so, the stations will no doubt be watched. And if we tried to get away on foot, or to hire a trap, we should be traced to a certainty in an hour or two, and the whole lot of us just swept up into a dustpan by the broom of the law, as easily as a woman sweeps up the pieces of a broken china jug."

"You talk about it damned lightly," said Number Six; "but if that's so, the hangman's noose is as good as round our necks."

"Not at all," said Number Two. "Trust yourself to me, and you are perfectly safe. It so happens that I've lived near Tarborough a long time, where I am looked upon as a respectable, if eccentric, member of society, and I shall never be suspected of harbouring criminals or of being one myself. My house is only a mile or two away. It's a little old-fashioned place, where I and my one man-servant—no woman shall ever set foot in house of mine—have lived on and

off for ten years. My man's as safe as I am—I'll go bail for him. In fact, I was going to propose him for one of the three —there are three now—vacancies on the council. You must all lie low at my house for the present, and when the hue and cry is over you can get away one at a time. And while you are there we can scheme out our plan of campaign together. You see, I'm giving myself away to you entirely by letting you know where I live, and breaking the secret of my identity. But I trust you, and I promise you that you are safe in trusting me."

"Stop a minute," said the irrepressible Number Six. "Do you think that woman peached on us to spite *you?* If so, she knows who you are, and most likely where you live; and in that case to go home with you would be walking right into the lion's den, as, if she's told the police, they'll make for your house first."

"I don't believe she did know who I am," answered Number Two. "Our late chief kept all our identities secret. She may have guessed that I'm a man she knew ten years ago, but in that case she

knew me under another name. Still, there is the chance that she knows, and she has told the police. You never know how to reckon when you're dealing with women. But I'm going to chance it, and go back to the house; and you'll have to make up your minds pretty quickly, unless you want to stay here till those bobbies find out they've been fooled, and come back for us. Which is it to be, friends? Are you coming with me or not?"

"Yes, we're coming with you," was the answer.

"All right, come along. If the bobbies know who I am they'll make straight for my house, and'll be there almost as soon as we shall. So we shan't be wanting excitement this trip, anyway. Come along. Here goes to try our luck! If they *are* there, the best we can do is to die hard. I'd rather be shot or clubbed in a tussle than be fed up like a Michaelmas goose to have my neck twisted on a scaffold. Mind, if we *are* caught, every man jack of us here will play a game of swing at Newgate, with a hangman to push us off."

CHAPTER XIV

THE BURGLAR, MR. PAUL AND SOME "BOBBIES"

Number Two was not mistaken in believing that his identity was unknown to the police, and that his house was, therefore, a secure hiding-place. Excepting that a constable called to inquire whether Mr. Hall—as we learned our host's name was—had seen any suspicious characters in the neighborhood or about his premises, they left us entirely unmolested, although the affair had, as the London and local papers informed us, created a sensation. From them we learnt that Number Two was right in supposing that the information had been laid hurriedly, and only a short time before the meeting took place. Late on the evening in question, a letter had been received at the Tarborough police-station, stating that the writer was a member of

a gang of five criminals who were to meet that night in a disused shed in the brickfield close to the cemetery. The letter then went on to say that the writer wished to turn informer, and that if the police would surround the shed, and make prisoners of those there assembled, the writer would then make himself known to the authorities, and would place at their disposal whatever evidence was necessary to procure the conviction of his accomplices.

Under ordinary circumstances the police would have treated the letter as a joke, and either taken no action, or sent, perhaps, a single constable to inspect the shed. But since the discovery of dynamite at Fassett Square, and the subsequent murder of the caretaker, the authorities at New Scotland Yard had instructed the provincial police that there was reason to believe some treasonous plot was hatching, and that a sharp eye was everywhere to be kept upon suspicious strangers.

Hence the Tarborough police superintendent had decided to act upon the assumption that the letter was genuine,

and had mustered the entire strength of the local constabulary to effect an arrest.

The newspaper account then went on to say that the police had arrived at the shed, only to discover that the birds had flown; for, with the exception of the informer, who was impatiently awaiting them, they had found the place empty.

This, I may remark in parenthesis, was a touch of that adroit "official" garbling of reports or of evidence with which the country—and, I fear, sometimes the town policeman—who is more anxious to make out a case for himself and to convict somebody than to see justice done, contrives to keep his own blunder or oversight from coming to light. As a matter of fact, as the reader knows, the police did not find the shed "empty," for the very good reason that they had not looked to see if any one were there, but had let themselves be hustled off in pursuit of the supposed runaways.

So far as one could judge from the newspaper report, no suspicion that the police had been sent off on a wild-goose chase had occurred to them. They ac-

counted for the fact that they had been unable to find any trace of the four men or of the trap by the theory that the conspirators, suspecting that they had been betrayed, had driven a short distance away, and had then returned to the shed to be revenged upon the betrayer. This theory was supported by the circumstance that the dead bodies of a person whom the police apparently took to be the informer, as well as of the constable in whose charge he had been left, were found lying together within the shed. No mention was made in any newspaper report of the fact that, though dressed as a man, the dead informer was in reality a woman; so it is to be presumed that the police had some reason for wishing the secret of the informer's sex to be suppressed.

Mr. Hall, though a scoundrel, was, I am bound to confess, a hospitable scoundrel, and made the three of us—Number Four, Number Six, and myself (the so-called Number Seven), who with himself now constituted the council—very comfortable during our enforced stay at Heath

Cottage, as his home was named. It was a two-storied house, but Hall had transformed the space immediately under the roof into an eccentric, but by no means uncosy, apartment, which reminded me of a cross between a barn loft and a billiard-room.

Of the existence of this room no one but Hall and his man Hubbock had any suspicion, the entrance to it being very cunningly contrived. In most houses of the sort, where the space under the roof has been utilised as a loft for the storage of lumber—or possibly for the placing of a cistern—access to this loft is generally betokened by a small trap-door in the ceiling, either of the landing or of an upper apartment. In Hall's house there was no such trap-door, and the unbroken stretch of white-washed, but evidently ancient, plaster on the ceilings of the upper rooms and the landing, was the best possible answer to an inquiry whether the house had an additional chamber, or even a lath and plaster-floored loft under the roof.

But had any one opened the very ordi-

nary-looking cupboard in Hall's bedroom, and pressed in a particular way one of the pegs upon which clothes were hanging, pushing one hand at the same time against the top of the cupboard, that person would have been surprised to find that the cupboard top opened upwards on hinges, and that by letting down a rope ladder that had been tossed backward ready for use he could clamber easily into a chamber, the existence of which he would never otherwise have suspected. The rooms of Heath Cottage were all small, but by pulling down the central partition in the space under the roof Hall had improvised one apartment that stretched the entire length and width of the house. Around the sides, where, owing to the slope of the roof, it was not possible to stand upright, low and luxurious lounges, resembling Eastern divans, were arranged; and in the centre of the room was a billiard table, upon which—in spite of the fact that it had been brought thither in parts, and put together by Hall and his man—one could play a surprisingly good and true game. The

sides of the apartment were draped with lengths of gorgeously colored and superbly worked Indian fabric, which, following the line of the roof, were caught together, tentwise, overhead, whence hung several exquisitely wrought Eastern lamps, that threw soft but sufficient light upon the table below.

A more bizarre, but at the same time more cosy, apartment I have never seen in all my wanderings. Curious and out of place as the billiard table looked amid its oriental surroundings, it served to wile away agreeably many an hour which might otherwise have hung heavily on our hands; for to the "prophet's upper chamber," as our host styled the room, my colleagues and myself were confined during our stay with him.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, when he came up to apprise us of the constable's visit, "will you be surprised to hear that that polite man the superintendent of the Tarborough police has sent round specially to inquire about your health?"

Number Six, who was in the act of playing a ball and had not noticed Num-

ber Two's entrance, missed the stroke badly and let the cue fall rattling upon the floor as he turned round to face the new-comer.

"God forgive us!" he gasped. "You don't mean to say we're found out?"

"God may forgive you, but I won't, if you cut the cloth of my table," was the answer. "Found out? No, and never will be, if you'll only refrain from throwing cues about in that silly way. The constable merely called to know whether I had seen any suspicious characters about. You are safe enough here. It would take a cleverer man than any one they've got in the Tarborough force to find out this room."

"You seem to have a poor opinion of the local constabulary," I said.

"Poor opinion!" emphasised Hall. "Poor opinion! Why, man alive, I've got *no* opinion of them. Nor would you if you'd seen the way they muddled the burglary at my friend Paul's not long ago."

"Tell us about it," I said. "A yarn will be a change after so much billiards."

"Oh, there isn't much to tell," replied our host; "but if you'd like to hear it I'll tell you, if only to give you an idea of the way the Tarborough Sherlock Holmes goes to work.

"Paul is a scientific friend of mine, a bachelor and good fellow, but the most nervous of men. There's a big orchid-growing establishment here, and as Paul is writing a book about orchids, he has taken rooms in the town for a month or two, while he's pursuing his studies. As I said, he's the most nervous man I ever knew, and one of his special nightmares is burglars—why I can't think, for he has nothing that's worth any one's while to burgle. All the same, whenever he's changing his lodgings (and he's frequently changing them) he makes it a condition that he himself shall be allowed to lock up the house every night, to assure himself that all's right, having a castiron conviction that every maid-servant is either a fool, to whom the would-be burglar makes love for his own nefarious purpose, or else that she is nothing more than a thief herself and the accomplice of thieves.

"Anyhow, before taking rooms here Paul made the usual stipulation about being allowed to lock up, and, although the people of the boarding-house thought it queer, they raised no objection, especially as Paul pays promptly and never disputes a bill. Such a thing as a burglary is almost unknown in Tarborough, but one night there was a burglary at the boarding-house, and whether it was what the German poet Heine called the satire of the Almighty, or whether the thief was a humorous cuss (as some of our profession occasionally are), and having heard about Paul's little fad, thought he'd have a joke as well as a burgle, you must decide for yourselves. All I can tell you is that every single article that the thief or thieves took away belonged to poor Paul—his new great-coat, his boots, his umbrella, his clean linen just home from the laundry, his slippers and his stick, yea, everything that was his. Of course, he got no sympathy. The landlord, though very upset about such an unheard of thing happening at his house, could scarcely refrain from smiling; the serv-

ants giggled whenever they passed Paul on the landing, and the other lodgers chaffed him unmercifully. The only person who looked solemn was our friend the constable, who came down at once when Paul sent word to the station. Paul is always afraid of the powers that be. Officialism overawes him, and when the pompous policeman fixed a sternly official eye upon the poor little chap and put two or three searching questions, my friend got so confused and self-conscious that he afterwards confided to me he more than fancied that the officer suspected him of being the thief himself. However, he did his best to conciliate the representative of the law by inviting him very respectfully into the sitting-room, where he pulled forward his snuggest chair, brought out his best 'Scotch,' and placing a syphon of soda and a box of fragrant Havanas upon the table, invited Mr. Policeman to 'help himself.' This the legal sleuthhound condescended to do,—pretty liberally, too,—and while Paul in his apologetic way particularised his losses, the Tarborough luminary sat with

knitted brows and pursed lips, looking as learned as a judge. Finding the cigars so good and the whisky so much to his liking, he expressed a wish—when he had heard Paul out—that the officer next above him should be consulted. The maid was duly dispatched to request the presence of the official in question, to whom on his arrival his colleague passed the cigars and whisky, with the request that Paul would 'run over the details again.'

"The new-comer, after some consideration, was convinced that nothing could be done without Sergeant Davis. Once more the housemaid was put into requisition, once more Paul told his story, once more the cheering cup went round, and once more the soothing weed was kindled. The sergeant made a very serious business both of the whisky and of the robbery. He shook his head solemnly at the decanter as each detail was related, and declared, after hearing Paul to the end, that the matter was too serious for him to deal with, and that the Superintendent must at once be sent for.

"Well, to make a long story short, poor Paul had the entire staff of the station at his place, where they stayed knocking their heads together and punishing his whisky and his weeds until the decanter was empty and the fireplace was strewn with cigar stumps.

"Then the Superintendent took Paul aside with the air of a Cabinet Minister communicating a State secret and told him not to be uneasy, for, though he wasn't, for official reasons, at liberty to go into particulars just then, he might tell Paul in confidence that they'd got their eye upon some one; but as they did not get any other portion of their anatomy upon the thief for detaining purposes, poor Paul never saw his property again.

"And all the time the thief, as might have been supposed, was living in the same house. He turned out afterwards to be a humorous rascal of an Irishman—an impecunious devil who rented a room on the third floor, and had come to Tarborough to give singing lessons. The police did search his room, it is true, but, of course, they found nothing, for

after securing the stolen goods the fellow had opened a ground-floor window, to give the place the appearance of having been burgled, and had then carried his booty to his bedroom, where he made it into a parcel, which he dropped out of the window into the garden below, whence it was carried away by an accomplice. Of course, the police found footmarks on the flower-bed next morning, and this confirmed the burglar theory. Hence no further suspicion attached to the other lodgers, a circumstance of which the Irishman took advantage by wearing openly the only stolen article he had retained—a pair of brown boots, which he blacked over. When he disappeared soon after, he left them—worn to the uppers—behind him, with a short note to Paul complaining of the quality of the leather. He sent his love to the police, and advised Paul if ever he found himself getting shabby about the feet to borrow somebody's brown boots and 'Try Day & Martin's blacking'!

"That's the story, gentlemen. It wasn't worth the telling, except for the

welcome assurance it gives you that we have nothing to fear from the Tarborough police. And now, with your permission, we'll come to business."

CHAPTER XV

NUMBER TWO'S LITTLE PLAN FOR PUTTING A THOUSAND POUNDS APIECE IN EACH OF OUR POCKETS

"You have seen my man Hubbock. Well, I am venturing to propose that he be elected to fill one of the three vacancies on the council. It seems to me, when an outsider gets to know as much as, under the imperative circumstances, we could not prevent Hubbock from knowing about our business—that one of two things must happen. That person must either be more committed—must, in fact, be not only an accessory to what we have done or propose doing, but must be our actual accomplice—or else we must protect ourselves from the possibility of that person doing us a mischief or of turning informer by taking the one and only effectual way of shutting his mouth. Hubbock has been with me for four years, and I can go

bail for his trustworthiness. I've sounded him, and find him ready and eager to be elected. He will be a distinct acquisition to the council, for an abler fellow or a man of more resource I don't know. Are you or are you not willing that he should join us? I don't want to force my candidate upon you against your own judgment or your will, so if any of you have anything to say on the matter I hope you will not hesitate to speak out."

"All I've got to say," said Number Six, "is that I'm glad to hear that the chap's ready to become one of us. I don't fancy having people knowing as much about me as he does, unless they are all in the same boat. What do you say, mates?"

My colleague and myself assenting to this view, Hubbock was summoned and informed of the decision of the council. He was a short, squat man, the grossness of whose appearance did not prepare one for his apish imitation of fine speech and fine manners. His lumpy, bridgeless nose, deep-set, prying pigs' eyes, coarse-grained and pimply complexion, and huge mouth, that when he grinned stretched

almost from lobe to lobe of his flapping elephant-ears, seemed ludicrously out of keeping with his mincing way of speaking. Being always self-conscious in regard to his superiority, and anxious to impress every one with his aloofness from the common and "h"-less herd, he accentuated the aspirate, and the "t" in such words as "often," as aggressively as if they were testimonials to his own education and breeding. The effect of this was heightened by his habit of introducing into his conversation—no matter how irrelevantly—any grandiloquent phrase or high-sounding word which he had picked up, and probably only imperfectly understood.

"I am happy, gentlemen, to be thus honoured," he said, with a series of stately bows. "It has from time immemorial been my heart's wish to be a member of some such honourable society. But I have for long entertained grave apprehensions ("grave apprehensions," I may remark, was a phrase which had appeared—*à propos* of the health of some distinguished invalid—in the papers that

morning), yes, I have, I repeat, for a long time entertained grave apprehensions that I should never find myself thus favoured, and I thank you all from my heart."

"Spoken like an orator of one of the good old 'immoral' times," said Hall, slapping Hubbock on the back. "Now, if you'll sit down, I've got one or two matters of business that I'd like to put before the council of which you are now a member."

There was a nasty gleam in Hubbock's little eyes, which told me that the fact of his being ridiculed was neither lost upon nor relished by him, but with a smile which displayed an expanse of false teeth, reminding me of the keyboard of a piano, he bowed affectedly and relapsed into a seat.

"Gentlemen," our host went on, "I think that the time has come when it is no longer desirable nor feasible for us to attempt to conceal our identity from each other. It is possible—perhaps probable, if I speak my mind—that the woman who betrayed us has informed the police that we are all dressed and disguised alike.

But even were it not so, now that we are all thrown together in this way, it seems to me childish to keep up any further semblance of secrecy. Personally I am not, and never was, very keen on disguise. That sort of thing may, and often does pass muster in the street, or in the presence of people who have no cause for looking at the disguised person too closely, or for suspecting him to be other than he seems. But—practical as false hair and false beard may be for ordinary purposes, or for deceiving strangers—I am bound to admit that I never yet met the criminal whose abilities for 'making up' were so wonderful that he could enter unsuspected into conversation with any one who had reason to be suspicious. I have read of such criminals in books, where you have to take the author's word for it that the thing happened as you are told it happened, and I have seen them in melodramatic plays, where the person who is supposed to be impenetrably disguised is placed far enough away from the audience to maintain the delusion. But, as far as my experience goes, a prac-

tised criminal or a clever detective is too knowing in the matter of disguise to be deceived by false hair and false beard. You can see the join too plainly. When the man who has been in the habit of wearing hair on his face shaves it off, or the man who has worn none lets it grow, the disguise *is* often extremely effective. And when he adds to the change in his appearance by a change in his dress, or by skilfully darkening his skin (although, unless he darkens the whole of his body there is always a risk of being found out), the disguise is greatly assisted. But for us, at any rate, to keep up among ourselves the pretence of a disguise would, it seems to me, be idle, especially as there is the possibility, and even probability, as I have already said, that the woman who betrayed us has informed the police of the fact that we are all made up alike. I think we shall only be courting discovery by continuing the practice."

"I say ditto to that," said Number Six. "Them as is of the same opinion will oblige by hoisting a paw.

"Carried unanimous," he remarked,

turning to Number Two. "There's unity for you. The Liberal party ain't in it with us, for pulling together amicably. Now I've got a word of my own to say, and it's this. It's more than time this syndicate had a leader. We're not like the Liberal party in that. They can do without one seemingly, but we can't, and the sooner we've got a head the better. Well, that head don't want much looking for. It's right between your shoulders—Number Two. Hands up, those who vote for Number Two as 'the chief.'"

Once again the show of hands was unanimous, and Number Two having made fitting acknowledgment, the serious business of the meeting was commenced.

"My friends," said our new chief, "I've got a little move to propose that should put a thousand pounds into each of our pockets. You know, of course, that there's a big dock strike on. Well, no less a sum than £5,000 has been subscribed by the working men of Germany, and this money has been sent over to their fellow workmen in England to enable

them to carry on the war which is being waged against capital.

"At least, we are told that the money has been subscribed by the working men of Germany, and some of the papers have prophesied the coming of the millennium on the strength of it. The gush about Universal Brotherhood in which they are indulging is quite pretty to read. I wonder what they'd say if they knew the truth? They don't know it, and can't tell you, but I can and will. It struck me that £5,000 was a tidy sum for any Germans—let alone working men—to hand over gratis to Englishmen. My experience of Germans has been all the other way. We're taxed pretty heavily enough as it is, to keep in luxury and idleness a lot of pauper German princes with whom our Royal Family (and that's German too) has intermarried, and every business man knows that London is swarming with Germans, who come over here and will live upon next to nothing a day, while they worm themselves into the heart of our trade, so that when they have got to know all our business they can go back

to Germany and try to cut us out and undersell us in our own markets. Some don't go back to Germany till they have made their pile, but then they do—and take their money with them. Though they bring nothing into the country, they carry millions out of it annually—millions that should be in the pockets of Englishmen, and would be in English pockets but for the fact that Germans are shouldering out Englishmen by the unfair competition of accepting a wage which can't keep body and soul together. How even a German can live on the wage they'll take, God only knows, but so long as the employers can get men to work for nothing they employ them, and, as a consequence, thousands of Englishmen are out of work to-day and starving on account of the competition of cheap German labour. And the curious part of it is that these Germans always get on. The man who's working for nothing to-day, and living upon a crust and a glass of lager, will be smoking the best cigars, drinking the best wine, and wearing the best clothes in a few years. Talk about England for the

English, why, it's England for the Germans, and nothing else. In other countries they don't put the alien on the same, if not a better, footing than their own people, as they do in England. On the contrary, they put difficulties in the way of the foreigner. And if Englishmen were to go to Germany and cut Germans out as Germans are cutting us out, there'd be riots, and massacres, and murders. Germany give us £5,000 for nothing! I knew better than that, so I set to work to get at the truth, and what do you think it is? Not six hundred pence of that money has come from German workmen. It has come—almost the whole of it—from German employers, and is sent to furnish sinews of war to the agitators who are fermenting mischief between the masters and men. But why? Because every day the strike lasts sees our trade drifting into the hands of Germans, who, when they have once got it, will take care to keep it. I don't say that the strike leaders aren't honest men. They are honest, but they're fools, for all that, for if they knew how much the 'German

employers have had to do with starting the strike, and what it is worth to German trade, they'd advise the men to go back to work to-morrow on any terms.

"But I'm not here to talk politics; I'm here for us to consider how we can turn what's going on to our own advantage. Well, gentlemen, I'm known in the commercial world as Mr. Rolandson Hall, the secretary of the Anti-Capitalists Association for the Protection of Labour, and the money has been sent to me to pay over to the strike leader. The question is, how is that money to find its way into our pockets, instead of into the pockets of the agitators? I tell you frankly that even if I were an honest man, instead of being a swindler and a thief, I'd make no bones about laying hands upon that money. Rogue as I am, I'd rather chuck it in the sea to-morrow than that it should go to the strikers, when I know that it has been sent over by Germans only because they know that while the English workman and the English employer have their hands on each other's throats, the trade is being diverted to Germany. That the

wife and children of the men are starving, and that the masters are being ruined, doesn't trouble these Germans, so long as they can pocket the coin. So, as I say, although I am appointed to receive the money and to hand it over to the strikers, I'm ready to tumble to any plan that will put the cash into our own pockets. I'm not without a conscience, though I am a thief, but on that matter I confess I've no more conscience than a spider. The question is, how is it to be done?"

"Have you got the money?" asked Number Six.

"Yes, it is in my possession at this moment."

"Then don't let it go out of your possession. Let's share it between us and make ourselves scarce."

"My good fellow, don't talk like a madman!" said Number Two. "A seat on the council is worth thousands a year to each of us, and to do as you propose would be to kill the goose that lays the golden egg, and for a paltry thousand apiece. Why, if these German employers thought there was any chance of the strike com-

ing to an end through the men being too reduced to carry on the war, it would be an easy thing to squeeze another £5,000 out of them. No, no; we must have the money, but we must work the business so that our—or rather my—honesty can't be called into question.

"Now listen to my plan, and if any of you can think of a better one, I'll be glad enough to hear it. I've arranged that there shall be something of a ceremony on the occasion of the handing over of the money to the strike committee. I've got the loan of a big hall at the East End for the purpose, and I intend to make a bit of a splash. The editors of all the democratic papers will be invited, and all the M. P.'s and other public men who talk tall about the sacredness of labour, the voice of the people being the voice of God, and all the rest of it. They'll come readily enough if they think there's a chance of a good advertisement, and we'll arrange that. The hall I am taking will hold a couple of thousand people. It has a window right behind the platform, which in winter is covered by a thick plush cur-

tain, but in summer can be left open, and so keep the place cool, which is a consideration, for if the weather is as hot as it is now the place will be precious stuffy. The chairman will sit at the table, with myself on his right, and the members of the strike committee, the M. P.'s and so on around us. After the usual preliminaries, the chairman will call upon me to hand over on behalf of the German working people the noble sum they have so generously and self-sacrificingly subscribed to assist the working men in England. I rise, make my speech, work it up well, and present the satchel containing the money—gold and small bank-notes—and then resume my seat. The satchel will, of course, be accepted on behalf of the British workman by the chairman. But when the enthusiasm is at its height, the electric light will suddenly be turned out, immediately after which a small (quite harmless) bomb will be thrown against the wall and exploded somewhere in the room. At that particular moment, when every one's attention will be distracted, I shall snatch up the satchel and

toss it out of the open window behind me, where one of us will be waiting to secure it. The sudden change from light to darkness will prevent those present from seeing what is going on until their eyes have become a little accustomed to the darkness; and the bursting of the bomb will so dazzle them and give them such a fright, that I hope my little manœuvre will be well covered, and the fact of my having risen from my seat, even if it is noticed, won't arouse suspicion, for the chances are that the bomb will bring the whole platform to its feet, and will perhaps create a panic. When the light is turned on again, and the money is found to be missing, there will be a row, and a big one, of course, but that needn't trouble us, and we can let them fight it out among themselves.

"What do you think of the plan, gentlemen? You see, we manage the business without incurring any great suspicion or running much risk, and we put a clear thousand apiece into our pockets. The idea strikes me as all right. We can't afford to let it be supposed there's any

hanky-panky games going on, so far as we are concerned, as if so we shouldn't be allowed the handling of the money that's subscribed by the different associations, and leagues, and trade unions which we represent. And as having a finger in the pie means some thousands a year, it wouldn't pay us—for the sake of a thousand apiece—to incur suspicion. But if my plan works out according to my idea—and I don't see why it shouldn't—we get the money all the same without losing the confidence of the public."

"You're a genius!" said Councillor Number Six. "Wasn't I right, mates, when I said he was cut out for our chief? Now tell us when the thing comes off and how the rest of us are going to help you. I think I'm the boy to wait outside and play at catch-ball with the cash-box."

"Easy, my friend—easy!" put in Number Two, as I shall still continue to call him. "Have you forgotten that we are all wanted for the murder of a constable not two miles from this very spot, and that the murder took place only yesterday? You are safe enough in this house,

or rather in this room, but any stranger who's seen in the neighbourhood just now may be called upon to give an account of himself. We can't do with less than three to carry out the business successfully. I must be on the platform to do the bomb business and toss the cash out of the window, for one; then one of us must be outside to catch it, and make off with it; and one of us must undertake to put out the light at the right moment.

"Two out of the three must be Hubbock and myself, who can go out of the house unsuspected. The other must be one of you three gentlemen, but we shall have to go very carefully to work to smuggle him out. The remaining two had best lie low here meanwhile. I'm sorry I can't arrange for the whole of you to lie *perdu* for the present, but I don't want to let any one else into our secrets, and must rely upon one of you to help. Will you three draw lots to see who's to act with Hubbock and me? I think Hubbock should be the person to secure the money when it is tossed out. He knows the spot well and the neighbourhood. It would be too

bad to have the money get back into the hands of the strikers, after all our trouble."

"Yes," said Number Six bluntly, "and it would be too bad too if Mr. Hubbock lost hisself when he'd once got his hands on the money. I'm a bit of a stickler for what's gentlemanly myself, but it's surprising how bad one's memory gets when there is a matter of five thousand pounds asking some one to put it in his pocket, and forget his way home again."

"If you have nothing more to the point to put forward than that," said Number Two, with an unpleasant sort of smile, "perhaps you will be so good as to prepare the papers for the lot-drawing. I'll go bail for Hubbock's honesty. No, I've used the wrong word. It is honour, isn't it, not honesty, which is said to exist even among thieves?"

"Not so much of the 'thief,' please, unless you're speaking for yourself," retorted the fellow. Then, grumbling something under his breath about "the boss being in a mighty hurry to put on the pot," he proceeded somewhat sulkily

to do as he was told. Folding into slips several half-sheets of paper, one of which was marked with a ×, he tossed them into a hat, and shook them all up together.

"Now, gentlemen," he said, "we'll draw them one by one until we've got three apiece, and then we'll open up and see who's got the ticket. We'll draw with our backs to the ballot box, please, and then no one can accuse me or any one else of faking the rubber. Put your hand behind you, Number Seven, and start the game."

After the hat had been three times round, we examined our papers. That with the × had fallen to my share.

"You've got to play Jonah this journey," yelled Number Six, slapping me on the back; "but don't sink the ship if you can help it, old man. We want to see that thousand pound apiece in our pockets first."

CHAPTER XVI

NUMBER TWO AND MYSELF JOURNEY TO LONDON TO ATTEND THE GREAT MEETING

Number Two called me early on the morning of the meeting.

"You and I are going to travel up to town together, Number Seven," he said. "It will be best so, as in that case you'll pass as my friend, and no suspicion will attach to you. Hubbock will follow later. The trap will be at the door for us in half an hour. If you want the loan of a razor you can have mine, and perhaps you'd better put on a suit of my clothes, in case the police happen to know that our uniform is blue serge. If you'll come with me, I'll show you my wardrobe, and you can pick out what will fit you best, and supply yourself with some clean linen."

I nodded "good-bye" to my two colleagues, Number Four and Number Six,

and clambered down through the cupboard-top into Number Two's own room.

When we were out of hearing, he took me by the arm somewhat familiarly. "I'm glad the lot fell upon you, Number Seven," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Well," he answered, "we are all blackguards, or we shouldn't be members of this rascally syndicate. All the same I think I'd rather work with a blackguard who ought to have been a gentleman (as is, I think, the case with you) than with a gentleman who ought to have been a blackguard."

"That sounds cleverish," I replied, "but I'd not know what it means. However, I take it that you mean it complimentary, and that you want me to infer that you'd rather work with myself than with either of the other two upstairs."

"That's it," he said. "I was afraid I was going to draw 'the foreman'—I always call that glib rascal Number Six 'the foreman.' He reminds me of the spokesman of a deputation of British workmen with a grievance. When he

isn't insolent, he's cringing, and hang me if I know when I like him best or least!"

I ought, I suppose, to have been flattered by Number Two's advances, but I was by no means certain whether his assumption of cordiality towards myself was not meant as much as a "blind" as for any other reason. And even had I been convinced of his sincerity, I could not have brought myself to make friendly overtures to a man whom I was all the time planning to betray.

So I remained discreetly silent, finding which Number Two said no more, except to inform me that breakfast was nearly ready.

During the meal he told me where the hall in which the meeting was to be held was situated. "You had better go there direct," he said, "when we get to London. The care-taker won't be there till noon. He lives some little way off, and I've told him to stay in all the morning, as I'm calling to see him about the final arrangements, and I haven't time to go far east. But I've got a duplicate set of keys. Here they are. The switch, for

turning the electric light on and off, is in the space between the double set of swing baize-covered doors. You'll see a little cupboard rather high up on the right. The key is always in it. Turn the light on and off several times, to make sure you understand it. There is a pair of round glass windows, about on a level with your head, on the inner set of doors that lead into the hall. Watch the platform through them You'll see me place the bag containing the cash on the table. When I put my hand on the top of my head, slip away at once, and turn off the light."

"And suppose there is a policeman or the care-taker there?" I asked.

"They'll stand in the inner lobby, if so," was the reply. "The double set of spring doors was put there to keep out the noise of the street, as well as to keep out the draught. But they are placed inconveniently near together,—the County Council built the place, I expect; no one else would have done the thing so clumsily,—and it's quite a work of art to pass in and out without getting a nasty

clump from one or other of the swing doors."

"I understand," I said. "Am I to turn the light on again afterwards?"

"No, I shouldn't trouble about that. If you should chance to be seen when turning off the light, and you went back to the place afterwards, you might get collared. The policeman, or the care-taker, or some one else can see to that. You'd best be off when you've turned on the total eclipse. You won't be able to get back here again to-night; but if you come to-morrow afternoon by the three o'clock train from St. Pancras, I shall be home by then, and will meet you with the trap. You'll be in time for the sharing up of the money. Now I think you have your sailing orders complete, and, if you have finished your breakfast, we'll be off to town."

Arrived at St. Pancras, Number Two and I parted company, he perhaps to plan some new devilry, I to visit the hall where the meeting was to take place. It was a big red-brick building, lying back a few feet from a main street. In front was a

gravelled space with iron railings. On the right was a lattice-work wooden door opening upon a narrow passage that ran between the side of the hall and a high brick wall, and leading to the yard behind. It was upon this yard that the window immediately behind the platform looked, and here Hubbock was to post himself, in order to secure the bag containing the money, when it was thrown out.

Of that money I was determined by some means to possess myself, if only to prevent it from falling into the hands of either the syndicate or of the strikers. That the former would put it to no good use, needs no demonstrating. Nor—Conservative and Imperialist as I am—did I feel that it would be much better employed in the hands of the strikers. Number Two had stated—and I saw no reason to disbelieve him—that the money had been sent to England by Germany, and for so sinister a purpose as to prolong a strike, and so to cause English trade to drift irrevocably into the hands of the Germans. In that case, by preventing

the money from coming into the possession of the strikers, I should be serving the cause of my country. I had often enough had to make excuse to myself for the means by which I obtained money. For once in my life I was in the position of being able to steal, not only with a clear conscience, but with a glow of virtuous self-righteousness. The only question that troubled me was how I was to go to work. I was at first strongly tempted to take some one—say my brother—into my confidence, and to get him to undertake to switch off the electric light at the critical moment, so that I myself might be on the spot when the bag was thrown out, and make off with it before Hubbock could lay hands on it. It would, of course, be necessary to disguise myself, so that my fellow conspirator should not recognise me, but that need not be very difficult. The meeting was purposely arranged to commence at nine o'clock, in order that working men of all sorts might have a chance to be present; and as there was no lamp in the yard behind the hall, and night would by that time have fallen,

I might easily escape identification. Thrash my brain as I would, however, I could hit on no plan for so concealing myself in the yard as to escape Hubbock's notice. The place was nothing more than a bare, gravelled patch, some few feet square and surrounded by four high walls so that it would have been next to impossible to find a shelter in which to conceal so much as a cat. Besides this, I was disinclined to broach even to a brother the business on which I was engaged. Half-confidences would be no use in such a case, and unless one were prepared to make a clean breast of it, the thing had best not be spoken about at all.

Not often have I been so hard put to it for a way out of a difficulty, but in the end I decided that the following was the only feasible plan. If immediately after turning off the light I slipped round to the side door that led to the yard, I should be in ample time to cut off Hubbock's retreat. His only way out from the back would be along the side passage, and as the bag could not be thrown out of the window until the light had been

turned off and the bomb exploded, the chances were that I should be able to be on the spot in time to get first snatch at the bag. And even should I find it in Hubbock's possession, my superior height, strength, and weight would give him no chance in a tussle. To have that bag I was determined, and if Hubbock showed fight, so much the worse for him.

Now that I had decided upon my line of action—unsatisfactory though that line of action was in many respects—I began to feel easier in my mind, and after switching the light on and off several times, to make sure that everything was in working order, I locked up the hall, and went in search of lunch. Number Two had told me that the key he was lending to me was only a duplicate, and that, as the care-taker had one of his own, I need not concern myself about returning it; so I had the whole afternoon in which to arrange about a disguise and to attend to the batch of letters which I found awaiting me at my chambers.

Evening was creeping on when I sallied forth again to make my way to the hall,

which I reached some half-hour before the advertised time of the meeting. Number Two had omitted one detail. Admission to the meeting was only to be had by ticket, and as he had forgotten to supply me with the necessary pasteboard, I was at first refused admittance. It was fortunate that I happened to have in my pocket the proof of an article I had been writing, which I produced in evidence of my claim to be a representative of the Press. Otherwise, so inexorable were the guardians of the gate in their refusal to admit any one without a ticket, that I might have been left outside altogether; in which case the lights would not have been extinguished and the £5,000 might by this time, like the proverbial bread which is "cast upon the waters," have found its way back again to the German pockets whence it emanated.

CHAPTER XVII

"HELL—WITH THE FIRE OUT"

The "British workman," of whom we hear so much, but whom we see—at work—so seldom, is by no means to be confounded with that honest, decent, deserving citizen, the British working man. When the latter is not at his work he is to be found at home. Nor to seek the former need we go far. Hyde Park on Sunday afternoon and the public-house during the rest of the week appear to be his permanent addresses. Of the British working man there was no sign at this meeting, but that that amiable representative of sweet reasonableness, the long-suffering, toil-exhausted, tyrant-oppressed British workman, was present could be both seen and smelt. Certain sympathetic newspapers had, apropos of the strike, informed the world that he was "sorely pressed to keep body and soul together." To me his chief anxiety

seemed to be to sustain a close relationship between body and malt liquor. Anyhow, here he was swearing and sweating, yelling and smelling, cheering for the employed and cursing the employer, and generally breathing brotherhood and beer upon the assembly.

It was indeed a fraternal gathering in every respect. While waiting for the advent of the speakers, the audience amused itself by singing a song, the refrain of which was—

"Dear old pals,
Jolly old pals,
Pulling together" (at pint-pots presumably)
"In all sorts of weather;
Give me the friendship of dear old pals."

Some of those present were so affected by the touching sentiment of the beautiful song that they insisted upon singing with clasped hands, and one genial soul expressed a wish "to hit the ——" (meaning myself) "in the b—— eye," because I declined—more from sanitary than from social reasons—to accept a proffered hand, which, though problematically hardened

by honest toil, was most indubitably darkened by honest dirt. Another section of the audience, probably the coster contingent from Whitechapel, bellowed the chorus, what time the arms of each corduroy-clad and button-spangled Adonis were fondly encircling a comrade's neck, in the manner of 'Arry and 'Arriet on Bank Holiday, after which they proceeded to still further endearments, which were received with simulated screams or the protesting "Garn!" or "Get out!" with which the chaste Diana of the slums coyly rebukes her too ardent lover.

Altogether it was a scene which those amiable and sanguine-souled men and women who look for a time of which it may be said that—

"The war drum throbbed no longer, and the battle flags were furled,
In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world,"

might have regarded with tears of sympathy—or sorrow.

The entrance of the chairman, the strike committee, and the delegates was

hailed with tumultuous applause, which rose to a frenzy when, at a sign from Number Two, the care-taker of the hall pulled a string that communicated with what looked like a bundle of dirty linen that was screwed up close to the roof over the chairman's head, but when loosened resolved itself into the respective flags of Germany and England intertwined. Again and again the building re-echoed with patriotic cheers, varied by "Rule, Britannia!" and the inspiring strains of realistic imitations of a German band playing slightly out of tune, this last being no doubt intended as a delicate compliment to the great nation which supplies the soulless Englishmen with music, and on this occasion, and "for one night only," as they put it in the theatrical profession, had supplied him also with money.

Then the serious business of the evening commenced.

"Seldom since our race was created," said the chairman, "had the inhabitants of this planet gathered together on an occasion which marked so great an epoch

in the history of mankind and did such honour to the human heart." (Vociferous cheers and cries of "Good old heart!") "Personally he was proud to think that he had lived to see this day,—this glorious day, this never-to-be-forgotten day,—when two great nations had combined to unfurl the flag of the Brotherhood of Man, and had planted it on the watch-tower of civilisation for all the world to see." (A voice: "Never mind the flag, old chap. Have you got the money there? That's what we want to see.")

"Yes," responded the chairman, with an indulgent smile, as if saying to himself, with Pecksniffian philosophy: "Let us humour these good creatures, these dear creatures. It is natural that they should wish to assure themselves, by a sight of the gift that has come from Germany, that their dream of brotherhood is indeed realized."

"Yes, the money is here safe enough, my friends," he said. "It is in that satchel which is now held by my honoured co-labourer and colleague, Mr. Rolandson Hall, whose life is, as you all know, one

long sacrifice in the cause of the suffering and the oppressed" (more cheering, and gratified smirks and bows on the part of Mr. Rolandson Hall, *alias* Number Two of the Syndicate of Scoundrels), "and which he will soon have the honour of presenting on behalf of the people of Germany, and I of accepting on behalf of the people of England."

This statement was followed by a scene of the wildest enthusiasm and uproar, each member of the audience expressing his approval in his own way, by whistling, cheering, cat-calling, or bull bellowing. Those, whose superior height and weight gave them the advantage over their less favored companions, endeavored to gratify their sense of humour by playfully jump ing up upon the shoulders of short and slightly built brethren, whom they bore, half throttled, to the ground; while those whose physical shortcomings debarred them from taking part in such delicate exhibitions of humorous high spirits contented themselves by snatching at any hat which retained vestige of respectability, and sending it skimming quoit-

wise at the head of the gentlemen on the platform. When order, or something like order, was restored, other speakers followed the chairman, some exulting in a rapidly approaching Millennium, some speaking less inflatedly, and some with sound common sense, but all more or less pointing to the fact that the combination of the working classes of two great nations was an assurance that the day was not far distant when the working men of all nations would follow the splendid example which had been set by the working men of Germany in coming to the rescue of their oppressed fellow-workers in England.

One enthusiastic speaker brought down the house by declaring that the magnificent gift of money that had been "made in Germany," but had been sent to be spent in England, marked the dawning hour of the great day of Universal Brotherhood, when property would be shared alike, and when working men in the wide world over would acknowledge and claim each other "brothers in heart, and thought, and deed."

By this time I was beginning to feel that I had that evening found enough brothers to last out the rest of my natural life, and that a "Home for Orphans," who were also the only children of their parents, would be quite a desirable residence, if the market was going to be thus inconveniently overcrowded with compulsory brothers. And as Number Two was now on his legs, and the moment for turning off the lights would soon be arriving, I edged my way out and watched the rest of the performance through the couple of tiny oval-shaped windows, which were set, like a pair of eye-glasses shining out from an expressionless countenance, high up on the face of the swing doors. I saw him hand over the satchel to the chairman, who worked up his audience to a state approaching delirium by opening it and waving a bundle of crisp bank-notes over his head. Next he plunged a fist in, and bringing up a handful of gold, he let the yellow discs slide back again—a cascade of shining coins—into the bag, which he closed with a snap and replaced upon the table. Then

Number Two gave the signal, and in another instant I had done my part and turned off the lights.

A friend who was present told me afterwards that the scene inside—if a scene it can be called when there was no light by which to see—was indescribable. He said he could only liken it to "hell on a busy night—with the fire out."

Almost immediately afterwards the lights were turned on,—by whom I do not know,—and my friend, who is economical of speech, described the scene then presented as "hell on a busy night—with the fire on." Worse was to follow. Number Two, white with passion or with face powder, I cannot say which, was seen to leap upon the table, with one hand pointing to the door, and with the other hollowed round his mouth so as to form a sort of speaking-trumpet.

"Shut the door!" he thundered. "The money! the money! It's gone! Let no one out! The thief must still be in the room!"

My friend, who is a traveller and a "hunter of big game," says never to the

end of his life shall he forget the terrible fury of the trumpeted cry of a wild cow elephant when she turned upon her pursuers from the dead body of her bull calf, which they had slain. But he assures me that the cry of a thousand wild animals of the wood could not equal in fury the yell of blind hate and of baulked greed that went up from these wilder animals of the slum and the city when they heard that the money was gone.

How he extricated himself from that seething mass of human beings, fighting like wild-cats one with the other, he does not know. But he tells me that within two minutes from the announcement of the robbery there was scarcely a man, either among the speakers or among the audience, in that assembly of advocates of Universal Brotherhood, who had a coat on his back or a whole skin to his body.

CHAPTER XVIII

A "SCRIMMAGE" IN WHICH I PLAY THE PART OF FOOTBALL

The lights once switched off, I felt that there was not a moment to lose if I wished to be on the spot to get first snatch at the bag when it was tossed through the window.

Walking quietly out, I worked my way unobtrusively to the gate which closed the passage leading to the yard at the back of the hall. Fortunately for me, the hubbub inside the building, and the sudden putting out of the lights, had served to distract the attention of the loungers inside the railings and of the crowd outside, so I was able to open the gate and to slip through unobserved. Closing it silently after me, I hurried along the passage, but before I had gone a dozen paces I came upon some one walking slowly in the same direction, whom, when he turned on hearing my footsteps, I

found to my dismay to be the old caretaker.

"Where are you going, young man?" he inquired gruffly.

Perhaps my momentary hesitation in search of a plausible excuse aroused his suspicion, for when I said that I was only taking an airing, as the heat of the hall had made me faint, he answered, none too genially,—

"Then you take a airin' somewhere else. These ain't infirmary grounds, and if you feel faint the best thing you can do is to nip round to the Red Cow and get two penny'orth of brandy."

"Oh, I shall be all right in a minute, my friend, thank you," I said, thinking it best to humour him. "I don't care to go out into the street for the present, it's too crowded; but don't you bother about me, I shall be all right when I've had a stroll round in the air for a few minutes"; and with that I essayed to slip past him, being impatient of this unlooked-for hindrance.

"Well, you can't stroll round here," he said, barring the way with his bulky figure. "We can't have no strangers

along this passage. It's private property; so out you go and sharp."

Finding him thus obdurate, I did what I ought to have done at first, and slipped a coin—half a crown I thought it was—into his hand. His fingers closed upon it in an instant.

"I don't want to be disagreeable when a gentleman ain't feeling quite well," he began. "All the same——" Then he stopped disgusted. "Why, it ain't arf a crown. It's a penny—not so much even as the price of a drink. If you think——"

Just then I heard the bursting of the bomb inside the hall. There was not a moment to lose if I was to secure the bag, so, determining to take by force what had been refused me as a favour, I nudged my shoulder to the care-taker's chest and "charged" him in the good old fashion of the football field.

"Would you?" he shouted. "You rascal! I knew you were after no good!" and catching at my coat-collar as I was in the act of passing him, he tried to swing me round, but, losing his balance, fell backward heavily on the gravel, dragging

me, sprawling over his chest, on top of him. As we went down, a man—it was evidently Hubbock—carrying something in his hand darted round the corner, and jumping lightly over the prostrate pair of us, passed through the gate, which he banged behind him.

"Let me go, you dotard!" I shouted to the care-taker. "Let me go before I strike you. I must follow that man at all costs."

The old fellow was a man of spirit, notwithstanding his years, and held me so stoutly—I could not bring myself to strike him—that some seconds passed before I could shake off his grip.

When at last I managed to wrench myself free and leaped up to follow Hubbock, it was only to find that I had left the frying-pan for the fire.

From the open door of the hall a swaying throng—fighting, biting, kicking, scratching, and fouling the air with blasphemy—was now surging like devils vomited from the mouth of hell. Some of them must have heard the meaningless cry of "Stop him! stop, thief!" with

which the old care-taker saluted my flying figure. All I know is that for the second time that evening I was reminded of my football days, only on this occasion it seemed to me that I was the football and the centre of the scrimmage, and that some two dozen of devils—mad for blood, and pounding and bashing at me with hands and sticks, as well as with feet—were the players.

The old man's meaningless cry of "Stop, thief!" had led them, no doubt, to suppose that I was the stealer of the money, and that, if they were only quick enough about it, they might secure the booty for themselves.

It did not take long to undeceive them, for in less than half a minute I hadn't as much as a rag to my back; but, luckily for me, they fell to fighting among themselves for the few coins and valuables of which they had plundered me, and I was allowed to drag myself, bleeding, breathless, naked, and trembling in every limb, to a corner, where I lay feeling as one might who had been snatched from the ravening jaws of a pack of hungry wolves.

It was some days before I was sufficiently recovered to journey to Tarborough to claim my share of the money and to hear how Number Two had fared. I had telegraphed to say I was coming by the three o'clock train, and Hubbock was there with the trap to meet me.

"Well, is the money safe, Hubbock?" I said, as we drove off from the station.

"Yes, sir. I took care of that. Your share is waiting for you all right. Rather cheaply earned, sir, wasn't it?"

"No," I answered gruffly. "It struck me as rather dear. Where's your master?"

"In bed, sir—what's left of him. And a bad attack too."

"Attack—what of?"

"A catching complaint, sir. You appear to have suffered from it too—Universal Brotherhood, the master calls it. What did you say, sir?"

But what I said about Universal Brotherhood is not fit for publication.

CHAPTER XIX

FISTS AND FINGER-NAILS AND HOB-NAIL BOOTS

Hubbock was quite right in observing that Number Two had had a "bad attack." The poor man's face was patched like an old coat, he wore a green shade over one eye, and was sitting up painfully in bed and as stiffly as a sawdust doll.

"How are you, Number Seven?" he said with a feeble smile. "Excuse my not getting up to receive you. I have to move an arm or a leg all of a piece like a pump-handle, and even then I wince and sometimes squeal aloud with pain. How do I look, do you think?"

"Like a stuffed Guy Fawkes on a barrow," would have been my answer had I felt called upon to adhere to the truth. As it was, I answered cheerfully that he was "looking a bit chippy, but that a day

or two would no doubt set him on his legs."

"Set me on crutches you mean, don't you?" he groaned. "Oh! what a mauling I've had! The voice of the People may be the voice of God, but how about the People's fists and finger-nails and hob-nail boots? How did you get on?"

"I should have 'got on' well enough," I replied ruefully, "if only I could have 'got off.' But I couldn't. The People saw me switch the light off, and two or three of them strolled up to interview me after."

"Ah!" he said, trying to screw himself round the better to see me, and grinning hideously, but whether from pain or from gratification at finding a fellow-sufferer I could not say. "Ah! so you too have been interviewed by the People, have you? And how did you fare at their hands?"

"It wasn't their hands I objected to so much as their feet," I said. "Tearing one's clothes off one's back and bashing at one's head with half-bricks and sticks may have been only their playfulness.

But when it came to knocking a poor devil down and dancing on his stomach, not to speak of kicking him in the ribs, why, then I began to feel that there was such a thing as having too much of the People."

"I believe you," he groaned. "There is such a thing, and I've had it—Lord knows. However, there's one consolation. We did the devils out of their five thousand pounds, though I wouldn't go through such an experience again for five hundred thousand. Your share's in that writing-desk on the table there. "You'll find a bunch of keys in the top pocket of those trousers hanging at the foot of the bed. The little key's the one. Open the desk and take out the parcel with a big '7' upon it."

I obeyed, and found, a little to my surprise but greatly to my satisfaction, that he had not misled me. There, sure enough, was a parcel marked "7," containing no less a sum than a thousand pounds in gold and small bank notes.

After I had expressed what he appeared to consider unnecessary thanks, I asked

him whether our fellow conspirators were "upstairs."

"No," he said fervently, "they're gone, thank goodness. They were restless to be off as soon as they had pocketed the money; and as the hue and cry about the murder in the shed has blown over, I let them go—one at a time, of course. But talking of the money, I must warn you, as I warned them, not to let any one notice you're flush of cash, either by paying it into a bank or by blueing it too prominently. That sort of thing always arouses suspicion, and has led to the discovery of many a crime."

"Have they gone for good, then?" I asked.

"More likely for bad," he laughed. "Crime, like poverty, brings one into strange company. How you, and, for the matter of that, how I came to row in such a galley I can't think. I don't know anything about you personally, Number Seven, for Number One, who 'put you up' for election to the council, didn't take me into his confidence on the subject; but I fancy, as I've said to you

before, that you were meant for a gentleman."

Even had there been no note of interrogation—as of one inviting confidence—in his voice, I should have taken the last part of his sentence less as an involuntary compliment than as an intentional "draw" to lead me to talk about myself. Piqued apparently by my non-committal reply of "You're very kind," he changed the conversation abruptly.

"A meeting of the council is to be held here to-day week at five in the afternoon. Until then I need not burden you with my company, as I have nothing further to discuss. If you choose to remain here until then as my guest, you are at liberty to do so. Or you are at equal liberty to go. Which is it to be—stay or go?"

Under the circumstances I felt that it had better be "go," and said so.

"Quite so," he assented curtly. "The social attractions of Heath Cottage are not, I am aware, great, especially when the host is laid on his back. To-day week, then, we shall have the honour of welcoming you again. If you will come

down by the same afternoon train, Hubbock will meet you with the trap. The time and route by which the other two are coming have been arranged. I wish you speedy recovery from your hurts. Good-day!"

"I wish you the same," I said, and so we parted.

CHAPTER XX

THE MUSICAL BOX THAT PLAYED TWO VERY DIFFERENT TUNES

Number Two was sufficiently recovered to preside at the re-assembling of the syndicate. After greetings had been exchanged and inquiries had been made in regard to his health, he came to the point without further delay.

"Our newly elected councillor, Mr. Hubbock, who celebrated his advent to the council by successfully accomplishing the carrying off of the money which had been sent from Germany to furnish sinews of war for the dock strike, is apparently not content with that exploit, but is burning to distinguish himself still further in the service of the council. He has communicated to me a project which I have promised him to put briefly before you. It is, as you know, most necessary that we should impress our numerous subscribers in this country and in America

with our activity. Unless we keep ourselves well before them and before the public, subscriptions will assuredly fall off. Nothing has been done for some time in the way of striking a blow at the monarchy or at the aristocracy, or at any of the other figure-heads which we set up before our own particular public—just as a showman sets up the ever-familiar figure of Aunt Sally at country fairs—in order that the public in question may dump down money for shying at it. The public dearly loves some sort of Aunt Sally to shy at, and in a general way the Aunt Sallies are not very much the worse. But a wise showman who wishes to keep the coin coming in, humours his public, and takes care that every now and then one of the many cudgels that are thrown shall catch the old lady full in the face, and perhaps bash her features as well as break the pipe in her mouth. That makes the throwers feel that they are getting something for the money, and it keeps the coin coming in.

"Well, we've had two tries at the popular 'Aunt Sallies' lately, and each time

we have missed. The first time was when we tried to blow up that best-hated man in England, Lord Cranthorpe, and the second was the failure of our Jubilee programme for hoisting the Queen and the Royal Family sky high. It wasn't our fault that we failed. We know now, though we didn't then, that our failures were due to treachery, and if any proof were needed that it was so, it is, I think, to be found in the fact that the very first enterprise we undertake, after we have rid ourselves of the traitor, turns out a complete success. If that female Judas who pulled the linch-pin out of our plans for the blowing up of Lord Cranthorpe's place and for celebrating the Jubilee in quite another way than her Majesty intended, had been a member of this council when we planned to lay hands upon the five thousand pounds that was sent to the strikers by Germany—if she had been a member of the council and in our secrets, the money would not be in our pockets to-day."

Number Two paused for breath, and a murmur of unmistakable approval

and applause hummed through the room.

"Well, my friends," he went on, "Hubbock has devised a plan for retrieving the failure at Lord Cranthorpe's and the failure at the Jubilee. Here it is.

"Some years ago Hubbock was *chef* at the Ishmael Club. Have any of you ever been there? No? Then the Ishmael Club, you must understand, is a coterie of travellers, actors, artists, authors, journalists, musicians and so on, who pride themselves on being Bohemians. They are popularly supposed to be in revolt against conventionality of every sort, and in suburban and provincial society a member of the Ishmael Club is looked upon as a dreadful upsetter of the order of things and as one who stands for all that is 'advanced' in thought and manners and morals.

"As a matter of fact the members of the Ishmael Club—'Brother Ishmaelites,' as they call themselves—are just as sober and solvent a set of respectable, law-abiding, custom-following taxpayers and citizens as you will find outside the precincts

of the clubs of actual fogeydom. It is true that the original members who founded the Ishmael Club some fifty years ago were a Bohemian harum-scarum lot, but the club as it now stands is simply living on its past tradition and reputation. The present members do their best to delude themselves and the public into the belief that they are a dare-devil crew, and they take their club and themselves so seriously that I verily believe most of them are persuaded that no four walls in the world contain such a gathering of sad dogs as is to be seen in the dining-room of the Ishmael on their 'House dinner' night. They stick their heads, like so many ostriches, into the sands of the past, and refuse to see that the old order changeth and that the members of the Ishmael are Ishmaelites no longer. All that, however, doesn't concern us. If they like to play at Tom and Jerry, they are quite welcome to do it, and if they can make believe so well as to persuade themselves that they are the original and only Toms and Jerries, why, let 'em in heaven's name, and be hanged

to 'em. Our interest in them doesn't hinge on that; but there is one custom of theirs that has been handed on from what Mr. Hubbock calls 'time immoral' which does concern us and which I must describe to you.

"One of their rules—a very excellent one—is that of 'no long speeches.' Ten minutes is the maximum of time which is allowed to any man, guest or member, prime minister or paragrapher, and to keep this golden rule inviolate the original Ishmaelites initiated a custom which is still religiously followed. At every meeting of the club there is placed on the table in front of the chairman a little metal cube about the size of a pint-pot. When any one rises to speak, the chairman presses a spring at the top of the cube which sets an inside piece of mechanism in motion. This piece of mechanism is timed to run for exactly ten minutes, and if by that time the speaker has not finished and the chairman has not reversed the action, a bell strikes, at the sound of which the speaker, whoever he may be, must sit down. It is a rule that

might with advantage be introduced into other institutions. To be interrupted or called to order by a member of one's audience—even by one's chairman—is not pleasant. But no one, no matter how touchy, can accept a pull up from an irresponsible piece of dead mechanism other than good-humouredly.

"But what has all this to do with us, you say. Well, I'm coming to it. The fifteenth of next month is to be a field day with the Ishmaelites, and they have succeeded in nobbling the Prince of Wales as their guest. And who do you think is to be the chairman? A gentleman who has been honoured with a considerable amount of attention from the syndicate already—no less a personage than our friend Lord Cranthorpe. Gentlemen, wouldn't it be tempting Providence, who has, so to speak, delivered these two men into our hands, to let slip such an opportunity of retrieving the failure which attended our previous attempt on the life of Lord Cranthorpe and the Royal Family? The idea is not mine, but our excellent friend Hubbock's; but I am bound to

confess that if he succeeds, as he believes he can, in effecting the assassination of the Prince and of Lord Cranthorpe at one stroke, he will have struck a blow at the powers that be, the powers with which we are at enmity, that would immeasurably encourage the anarchist spirit which it is so much to our interest to foster, and that will bring in the subscriptions as nothing else we have attempted lately has done."

"How is it to be managed?" I asked; "and who's to do it?"

"Hubbock offers to take the sole responsibility and the sole risk upon his own shoulders," was the answer. "He knows that it has been a rule of the syndicate that every new councillor shall qualify for the honour and commit himself irrevocably to the responsibility attending a place on the council by undertaking the first piece of risky work that is to be done after his election. It is true that Hubbock has already qualified by undertaking the task of securing the bag containing the money which was tossed out of the window the other day. He hopes and I hope that the fact that he

accomplished the difficult enterprise and conveyed and delivered the cash safely and intact into the hands of the council has satisfied the councillor who at our last meeting raised the question of Hubbock's honesty, I beg pardon, honour. But he is anxious still further to prove his zeal by striking what I am bound to confess seems to me a peculiarly daring and deadly blow at royalty and at the aristocracy. We who constitute this council are paid to wage a war against the upper classes and the capitalists, and if Hubbock succeeds, I think it will go far to satisfy our clients and subscribers that we are giving them something for their money."

"Yes! yes!" interposed Councillor Number Six rather testily, being annoyed, perhaps, at the reference which had been made to him. "It seems to me there's too much jaw about these meetings. You don't need to explain all these things to us over and over again as if we were a pack of schoolboys. Ever since we lost our old chief, you jump at any chance of lecturing us, same as some old women do

who want to hear their own voices. We all know that to blow up the Prince of Wales and the other aristocratic perisher, Lord Cranthorpe, along with him will set business moving in the subscription line and we don't want to be told it all over again at every council meeting. The show ain't a prayer-meeting. The point is, can the things be done? If so, how?"

Number Two took the interruption in better part than I had expected.

"Very well, my friend," he said good-humouredly, "I don't want to inflict too many details upon you, I'm sure. Only as we all share the responsibility as well as the profits, it seemed only right to me that councillors should be fully acquainted with what was being done in their name. When you know beforehand how the thing is to be done, you will be able to judge the better whether Hubbock has acquitted himself capably and is deserving of further confidence and trust. I'm very sorry if I have overburdened you with detail. Shall I spare you all the details of Hubbock's scheme? In that case we can merely empower him to act and let the

details make themselves known by results."

I did not at all approve the turn that things had taken. It was only because I had been apprised beforehand of the conspirators' line of action that I had on more than one occasion been successful in frustrating their projects. But if secrecy were maintained in regard to their proposed operations, the game would be up as far as I was concerned, for unless I knew what move they were about to make, I should not known how to go to work to checkmate them.

"The chief's quite right in insisting upon everything being above board," I said boldly. "We don't want any hole-and-corner business in a concern like this. We are all like so many mountaineers roped together on a mountain. If one of us makes a slip and the others aren't prepared to set their feet hard and meet the jerk when it comes, the chances are that the lot of us get pulled over the precipice. And mind you, friends, a rope round your body on a mountain is one thing, and a rope round your neck on a scaffold is

another. I've sampled one, but I don't want to sample the other. So I think the chief is right in taking us into his confidence as he has done. We all hang by the one rope, so what I say is, 'Let us know where we're going.' Besides, in a concern like this, which claims before all things to be democratic, we don't want any one-man show. Here are we working to overthrow the autocrat or aristocrat wherever you find him, and you propose setting up one man who is to be our Pope and lead us all blindfolded by the nose."

"Give us your hand, Number Seven," said Number six, slapping me familiarly on the shoulder. "It's a good job you ain't a parson, for if I heard you preach a few times, I believe you'd convert me, and I'm damned if I could stand that. I'd no idea we'd got such an orator among us. Anyhow, he's convinced me; so go ahead, chief, and let's have the details in full."

Good humour being thus restored, Number Two continued his explanation.

"The thing is to be done in this way," he said. "Hubbock was once *chef* at the

Ishmael Club, and is still friendly with the steward and the other waiters. From one of them he has heard a little secret which is supposed to be known only to the secretary of the club and the committee. The Ishmaelites are very fond of having what I may call unrehearsed effects at the House-dinner evenings, and the member who is in the chair often springs a surprise upon the company by providing some unexpected feature for their entertainment. The secretary—a whimsical fellow—has hit upon an idea which he purposes to carry out on the occasion of the Prince's visit. 'Good fellowship' being a *sine quâ non* for election to the Ishmael, the Prince of Wales, who is, as every one knows, the best of good fellows in the social sense, is naturally a prime favourite there. As you all know, the Prince is only now recovering from a serious illness, and as his presence at the Ishmael will be his first public appearance after his convalescence, the Ishmaelites intend to give him an ovation. The speech of the evening will be, 'The health of our guest His Royal High-

ness the Prince of Wales.' Well, the secretary has sent the ten-minute time-keeper to Switzerland to have the ordinary gong replaced by a musical box which shall play 'God bless the Prince of Wales.' The chairman, in proposing the Prince's health, will purposely outstay his ten minutes. The gong will strike, but instead of merely sounding ten warning notes on the bell it will lead off with 'God bless the Prince of Wales.' As soon as the members 'tumble' to it (for the affair is to be kept secret from all but two or three), the chairman will spring to his feet and take up the air, which will be sung, all standing, and ending up with 'three times three.' That's just the kind of thing to catch on with the Ishmaelites, and I shouldn't be surprised if it proved an immense success and pleased the Prince into the bargain.

"Well, Hubbock has contrived—in virtue of his old connection with the club—to get engaged as an assistant *chef* for the occasion, and he also managed to get a peep at the address on the box that contained the gong, when it was sent off to

Switzerland to have the inside mechanism taken out and replaced by a musical box. The address was that of a well-known instrument maker in Geneva to whom Hubbock has since paid a visit. Need I tell you why? It was to get a duplicate gong made—a duplicate, that is to say, so far as the outside is concerned. But it isn't a duplicate inside, for instead of the musical box, Hubbock is getting an infernal machine made from a newly discovered explosive. It is an explosive so death-dealing and terrible that even the small quantity that can be packed away inside the gong will be sufficient to kill every one in its immediate vicinity, and, in fact, it is more than probable that it will kill every one in the room. Anyhow, the chairman, our old enemy Lord Cranthorpe, and the Prince, who as the guest of the evening will sit on his right, will be as good as dead men. The joke of it is that it will be Lord Cranthorpe himself who by winding up the gong—according to the regulations of the club—when he gets upon his legs will with his own hand put into motion the machinery

which will give him and his guest the Prince, as well as a good many of the members, a bare ten minutes more of life. The secretary is no doubt chuckling to himself to think of the stir that his own ingenuity in preparing so pretty a little surprise is likely to make. I think that the surprise which we are preparing for His Royal Highness, as well as for his lordship and the other members of the club, is likely to make a bigger stir. That, however, we can discuss when the thing's *fait accompli.* I'm getting shy of counting my chickens before they're hatched, since that miserable Jubilee fiasco. All the same, I think Hubbock's idea for adding to the evening's entertainment is very curious, and as he is willing and, in fact, anxious to undertake the business, I think that he should be allowed to consider his scheme as under our 'distinguished patronage,' as the placards put it, and to have our best wishes for his success. Anyhow, there's his programme, and as discussion is freely invited, I hope any of you who have anything to say will speak up."

"It's a very clever little arrangement," said Councillor Number Six, "and what I says is, Here's my respects and best wishes to Mr. Hubbock, hoping as he'll go ahead and scoop the trick. What do my other two honourable colleagues say?"

"We say 'ditto' too," I answered, speaking for myself and for "the Silent Councillor," to use the name by which I had dubbed the remaining member. "But if Mr. Hubbock and the chief will pardon me for saying so, there's a difficulty ahead which it won't do to overlook."

"What's that?" asked Number Two.

"This. Isn't it very likely after Hubbock has changed the gongs, that some member of the executive of the Ishmael will want to test the mechanism, if only to see that it is in working order? In that case the explosive would be a bit previous. We have no quarrel, I take it, with the members of the Ishmael Club as Ishmaelites. In fact, I'm not sure that the members of this council are not exceptionally qualified for membership of a club so-called, and, indeed, it

occurred to me while the chief was speaking, that the Ishmael Club would be a very suitable name for the particular fraternity of which we who are present in this room have the honour of being members."

"You are quite right, my friend," said Number Two with a laugh. "Hubbock and I both recognised that that would be a ticklish point. But Hubbock's idea is not to change the gongs until the last moment, when the table is laid and ready for the dinner. The Ishmael is a very free and easy place, and Hubbock is so well known there that he anticipates no difficulty in finding some excuse to effect the change. I think we may be content to leave it in his hands, since he is willing to undertake all responsibility."

No one demurring to this, Number Two announced that the next meeting of the Council would be held in the same place, and at four o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the proposed outrage at the Ishmael Club.

"I hope on that occasion," he said genially, "that we shall be in a position

to offer Councillor Hubbock our heartfelt congratulations at having succeeded in blowing His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the Right Honourable Lord Cranthorpe, M. P., to blazes."

With which humane sentiment the meeting broke up.

CHAPTER XXI

THE PRINCE OF WALES AT THE ISHMAEL CLUB

It was the night of the Ishmael Club dinner to the Prince of Wales, and though the rule by which members are permitted to introduce guests had on this occasion been suspended, the muster of Ishmaelites in their handsome trophy-hung dining-room was so great that even a director of the London, Chatham & Dover Railroad Company would have acknowledged that for once in his life he had met with a genuine case of overcrowding. So democratic a gathering—notwithstanding the fact that the future King of England and Emperor of India sat in the midst—is not often to be seen. At the Ishmael, brains and "good fellowship" are counted greater righteousness than "coin" or a coronet. Within its walls all men are equal. To a good fellow, the right hand of fellowship

is readily extended. The "stick" will find himself as readily cold-shouldered, and the assumer of "side" may think himself lucky if he be allowed to depart unbaited. To see the Ishmaelites "trail" a sufferer from "swelled head" is to undergo inoculation against that fell malady. The author who has suddenly found a public and as suddenly lost himself, or the Monied Nobody, who has made a successful bid for a baronetage by placing his thousands at the disposal of his political party, would do well to air his new honours elsewhere than at the Ishmael. When such a man is known to be in the house, the word goes round, and to him these trusting children of nature come to be instructed in the secret of his greatness. They sit at his feet and drink in his words of wisdom as if hoping thereby one day to follow—be it ever so humbly—in his footsteps. They ask him artless questions about himself, and when he condescends to gratify their very natural desire to be informed upon so interesting a subject, they tell each other audibly what a great man he is, or sit

listening with unconcealed wonder and admiration in their eyes. They beg to be allowed to present to him this or that friend or member who will esteem it a privilege to know so distinguished a person, and when their victim is most swollen—like a human wind-bag—with gratified vanity and a sense of his own importance, they unostentatiously produce the necessary pin, and what is left of him when they have done with him is scarcely worth the trouble of sweeping up, not to say of interment.

With the Ishmaelites the Heir Apparent had always been a prime favourite. Whatever their faults may be, they are at least not flunkeys, and his popularity with them is in no sense attributable to his exalted position, but to their regard for him as a man. If there is one man in all England who may be pardoned for allowing a flatterer to get the blind side of him, it is surely he whose every wish or whim it is the business of those about him to humour. Yet if there is one man in England who is absolutely inaccessible to flattery, it is the genial, generous, but

keen-eyed Prince. This the Ishmaelites know well, and they love him for it, just as they hail him Prince of Good Fellows, and the best and most honest hater of sham and humbug in the country.

Hence the dinner which was being given in his honour was the most brilliant and at the same time the heartiest function that the Club House has ever witnessed. Brains, pluck, and good-fellowship—these are what the Ishmaelites most delight to honour; but being a British club, they put bravery before even brains, and at the high table that night sat wearers of the Victoria Cross, leaders of forlorn hopes, admirals who had saved life as well as fought the enemy at sea, explorers, travellers, and soldiers who with a handful of men had held an impossible position or not hesitated to face a thrice outnumbering foe.

Everything had gone without a hitch, and there was no denying that the function was a magnificent success. The Prince, still pale from his recent illness, was, it was easy to see, both touched and gratified by the genuinely enthusiastic

and affectionate greeting which had been accorded to him; and never had he looked more thoroughly at home than when hobnobbing with the Ishmaelites.

Dinner being finished, and the permission, "Brother Ishmaelites, you may smoke!" having gone forth and been received with the customary yell, the chairman rose in his place to make the speech of the evening, by proposing the Prince's health. Another yell greeted the placing of the ten-minute bell before him, and yet another the setting of the machinery in motion. Then he began his speech. Nothing of the sort could have been happier, for there was not a false note throughout. He claimed for the Prince only that illustrious personage's due; and yet he referred so sympathetically to his illness, and paid so graceful a tribute to his qualities as a man, a sportsman, and a good fellow, that the Ishmaelites interrupted him again and again with ringing cheers.

The announcement — the unexpected announcement—that the Prince had that evening expressed his wish to become a

member of the club and a Brother Ishmaelite, brought the enthusiasm to the culminating point; but the welcome words had scarcely passed the chairman's lips before the first stroke of the ten-minute gong was heard, and at the sound he held up the customary silencing hand and dropped back into his chair.

The rule of the club is that when the gong strikes, the speaker, whoever he may be, at once resumes his seat, and every one sits in silence until the ten strokes have sounded, when members are at liberty to give expression to their feelings, a privilege of which they avail themselves by yelling, howling, and hurling derisive epithets, and even match-boxes, cigar-ends, or anything else which may be handy, at the offender who has transgressed their time-honoured ten-minutes rule.

Hence when Lord Cranthorpe relapsed into his seat there was a sudden hush while the members waited dutifully for the ten strokes to sound. Half a dozen seconds had not throbbed away before the Ishmaelites became aware that something

out of the ordinary—but what they did not know—was happening. There was a flutter of repressed excitement. Then some one called out "Hush!" and the silence became electric. What was that sprinkling of bird-song music that percolated the smoke-hung atmosphere as if fairy hands were flinging the largest of tiny wafer-like silver coins for all to gather? "Hush!" some one said impatiently again. Expectation stood on tiptoe, as every ear was strained and every face became alert and expectant.

Note by note the thin thread of music rippled out. It was recognised, and a tremendous cheer set rattling the trophies on the wall as the chairman rose and with a wave of his hand above his head took up the strain. In another second every man was on his feet, and "God Bless the Prince of Wales" was being sung as it had never been sung before.

"With heart and voice awaken
Those minstrel strains of yore,
Till Britain's name and glory
Resound from shore to shore.

From all our ancient mountains,
And from our lovely vales,
O! let the prayer re-echo—
God bless the Prince of Wales!"

The secretary's little unrehearsed effect was a huge success. Perhaps the Prince's illness had left him somewhat weak and shaky, for as the hymn concluded with the most deafening "Three times three," and yet again "Three times three," that ever left human ears buzzing and human hearts thumping, the kindly eyes of that right royal Prince of Good Fellows were suspiciously bright, and when in a few manly words he thanked his "Brother Ishmaelites" for the greeting that had been accorded to him, there was just the ghost of a tremble in the voice that is generally so firm and strong.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MAN WHO WAS "BLACKBALLED"

Need I say it was I who was answerable for the failure of Mr. Hubbock's little scheme?

I have been a member of the Ishmael Club for ten years, and have twice served upon the committee. When Number Two informed us that he was Mr. Rolandson Hall, I knew at once that I had heard the name before, and had on one occasion confounded it with Roland Hill. What that occasion was, however, I could not recall until Number Two's sneering and lying allusion to the Ishmaelites gave me the cue. Then I recollected that when I was on the committee of the club, a Mr. Rolandson Hall had twice contrived to get himself proposed as a member. The first time he was summarily rejected on the "qualification rule," and so did not even face the preliminary stage of being

"up" for election. Twelve months after he became a candidate for the second time, and on this occasion he was apparently determined to succeed, for he made the support of every member, with whom he was on speaking terms, a personal favour, and indeed left no stone unturned to attain his end, and so managed to squeeze through the preliminary qualification scrutiny. When, however, the committee met for the final consideration of candidates, Mr. Rolandson Hall was for some reason, which no doubt was good, promptly blackballed.

This fact, while it accounted for the sneers with which Hall had alluded to the club, made me all the more resolved to checkmate Mr. Hubbock's little demonstration.

Rather than that the guest of a club, of which I am a member, should come to harm under its roof, I decided—should every other means fail—to make known to the police the whole story of my connection with the syndicate. But I was reluctant to resort to so extreme a measure unless compelled, and as I thought I

saw my way to a simpler solution of the difficulty, I went to work accordingly. To find the instrument-maker at Geneva to whom the ten-minute gong had been entrusted, in order that a musical-box might be placed inside, was easy enough. It was easy enough, too—thanks to the thousand pounds which I had recently pocketed—to persuade him to supply me with a duplicate gong. The duplicate was to resemble the original in every way, and, like the original, it was to contain a musical-box, which, when wound up, would, at the expiration of ten minutes, play "God Bless the Prince of Wales!"

What was not so easy was the substitution of my musical-box for the infernal machine with which Hubbock had promised to replace the original gong. That he would not effect the change until immediately before dinner I knew, so that I had practically only a few minutes in which to accomplish my task.

While the rest of the members were in the reception-chamber waiting the arrival of the Prince, I made my way to the dining-room, with the gong which I had pro-

cured in Geneva under my cloak, and under pretence of looking where my seat was placed, began to examine the tables. But as the waiters were coming and going the whole time, no opportunity offered for making the exchange, finding which, I determined to take the bull by the horns; so boldly walking to the head of the table, I lifted the gong, and began turning it round and round, as if curious to learn the mechanism. No one but waiters being in the room, and they, I suppose, hesitating to interfere lest they should be rebuked for insolence to a member, I strolled—the gong still in my hands—towards the window, as if to avail myself of the light. Then turning my back for a moment, I contrived to effect the exchange; and placing the musical-box on the table, I left the club with Hubbock's infernal machine under my cloak, and having taken the thing to a place of safety, returned in time to be present at the dinner.

I was present also next morning at the meeting, when Hubbock had hoped to receive the congratulations of his fellow-

conspirators. Why the expected explosion had not taken place is no mystery to the reader; but Hubbock's mystification and mortification were equally great.

To have to report utter, if unaccountable failure was humiliating enough; but the smiling incredulity with which Number Two refused to accept any other explanation than that Hubbock had become flurried, and in his haste had placed the wrong machine on the table, added immeasurably to the poor man's wrath. Grinning with impotent rage and irritation, he again and again declared that the failure was due to no mistake of his.

He might as well have talked to a brick wall.

"My good Hubbock, my excellent Hubbock, it is quite unnecessary for you to excite yourself about the matter," said Number Two, smiling imperturbably. "Any of us might have done as you did. Outwardly the two machines—the musical-box and the bomb—were exactly alike, and as the waiters were no doubt inconveniently near at the time, it was

quite easy to make the mistake. The muddle is unfortunate, very unfortunate, but very natural, and we all admit you did your best."

"I tell you I *didn't* muddle the thing," roared the unhappy Hubbock, with tears of vexation in his eyes. "I had marked the two gongs, so that I should know which was which, and I tell you I put the infernal machine upon the table."

"Stop a moment," interposed Number Six. "It is easy enough for Mr. Hubbock to prove himself right if he is right. When he changed the gongs, he kept one of them. Where is it? There were only two gongs, and if the one our friend here put on the table was an infernal machine, the other one plays 'God Bless the Prince of Wales.' Let's have a look at the thing, and Mr. Hubbock can prove that he's right, straight off."

"Yes," said Hubbock, almost crying openly now; "but that's just what I can't prove. After I had made the exchange, and as soon as the dinner was far enough advanced for me to slip away unnoticed, I left the club—I needn't say that I didn't

want to wait for the explosion. I cleared out, and took the other gong—the musical-box—with me. I meant to have kept it as a memento; but when I thought what a hullabaloo there'd be after the explosion, and the death of the Prince, and that every one who was known to have been in the place would come under suspicion, I thought I'd better not run the risk of having the thing found on me, so I went along the Thames Embankment, and dropped it gently over into the water. So I can't prove that I'm right. All the same, I'll swear that the gong I set upon the table was an infernal machine, though I can't get Mr. Hall to believe me."

"My good and estimable Hubbock," smiled Number Two, "I've never known you to make a mistake before. But you have made one now, and you'd better recognise the fact, and not distress yourself unnecessarily. The gong you put upon the table not only didn't go off, but it actually played 'God Bless the Prince of Wales.' The papers are full of it this morning, though the whole contemptible business of a twopenny-halfpenny mu-

sical-box seems a tin-pot thing to me, for the club and the papers to gush about. But your gong didn't have a musical-box inside it, as well as a bomb, so, as I say, you must have put the wrong one on the table."

"No, I'll be damned if I did," vociferated the angry Hubbock, positively dancing round the room in his exasperation.

"In that case you did do it, for you'll certainly be damned," laughed Number Two. "You make yourself easy on that score, my friend. And I don't think it will be altogether on account of a musical-box."

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW THE POLICE DISCOVERED A HAREM IN THE HEART OF ENGLAND

It was a windy day, and as Number Two spoke we distinctly heard the gate at the end of the garden blow to with a bang.

"Who's that, I wonder?" said the chief. "I latched the gate myself just now very carefully. Some one must have opened it."

He rose as he spoke, and crossing to the side that faced the garden, put his eye to one of the many spy-holes that he and Hubbock had made.

Then he turned to us in alarm.

"I don't like the look of this, boys," he said. "There's a man coming up the path who looks and walks uncommonly like a plain-clothes policeman. And what makes the thing all the more fishy is that there's another hiding behind the hedge outside, as if on guard. Ah! there's the knock."

Sure enough an authoritative "rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat" told us that some one was making free with the knocker on the door below.

"What had we better do, Hubbock?" asked the chief, looking anxiously at his factotum.

"Let them knock, I think," was the answer. "They'll think there's no one at home. And even if they effect an entry and search the house, they'll never find us here."

"Perhaps you're right," replied Number Two, more nervously than was his wont, as the visitor below began to ring the changes with a series of sounding single blows that reminded one of a blacksmith plying his hammer upon an anvil.

"He's playing 'Rule Britannia' on it now," said Number Six, with an uneasy laugh. "I suppose you don't know anything about this caller, Mr. Hall? You were mightily sure about our being safe here, and about the police thinking you to be a respectable resident, and nothing's happened since to change their opinion.

I can't think it of you, that you'd play us false.'

Hall's reply was to take a revolver from his pocket, and to offer it, butt forward, to the speaker. "It is loaded in the six chambers," he said. "Keep it, and if I give you cause by as much as a finger stir to suspect that I'm in league with the police, blow my brains out where I stand."

"I ask your pardon for fearing for the moment that you'd rounded on your pals," said the fellow, not without dignity, "and I'm quite satisfied. Keep your shooting irons, Mr. Hall. You may have need of them, and I've got a brace of my own in my pocket if they're wanted."

The knocking ceased, and was replaced by a low whistle. At a signal from Number Two, Hubbock crossed to the spy-hole and looked out.

"I thought so," he said. "The man outside the gate is coming up the path. That's what the whistle meant. I fancy they're going to break in."

He was right, for before long we heard each of the windows and doors on the ground floor being tried in turn.

"They're all fastened," said Hubbock, "and they won't get in that way. Listen! they're breaking a window. Ah, now they're in. I hear their footsteps and voices in the hall. They're searching the ground-floor rooms, I expect."

"Keep still, every man of you," whispered Number Two sternly. "You three and Hubbock and I are the only living souls who know about this room. What cause the police have for suspecting me, and what they've come for, I can't think. But, whatever they have got to know, they don't know about this room, and if we keep perfectly still, the chances are, after they've satisfied themselves that no one is in the house, that they'll go away again. And if they do find us out, and it comes to fighting, so much the worse for them. We're five to two, and after all the risks we've run, we're not going to be taken by a couple of Tarborough bobbies."

"They're coming upstairs now, sir," interpolated Hubbock warningly. "We must be very quiet when they're in your room below, for I believe I left the cup-

board door open, and when that's so, the sound of what is being said or done in that room comes up surprisingly clear. Number Seven, you're nearest to the trap-door that opens into the cupboard. Would you mind standing on it, in case they should happen to try if it pushed up."

I tip-toed to the spot indicated, and took up my position as desired. The next moment we heard the two searchers enter the room below.

"This is the last room, Stocker," said a voice, "and now I think we've pretty well satisfied ourselves that no one is in the house. All the same, we're sure of our man, I think. Mr. Hall is a gentleman—every one knows that—and directly he hears who the villain is that he's been employing as a servant, and what he's wanted for, he'll be only too glad to assist us to make the arrest."

"There can't be any doubt about that, sergeant," was the reply, "and lucky for him too that he hasn't been murdered in his bed before this with that fellow about the place. How so pleasant-spoken a

gentleman as Mr. Hall could a-got imposed upon to take such a devil into his service I can't think. A forged character done it, I expect. That Hubbock 'd stick at nothing. Fancy him being the man who is wanted for those murders, and all the country a-wondering who it was as done it, and crying out against the police for not finding out. This ought to mean promotion for you, sergeant, when you've made the arrest, and I shouldn't be surprised if Mr. Hall came down with something handsome as well."

An exclamation from the sergeant checked the voluble Stocker.

"Some one's been a-writing in this room, and not very long ago," explained the officer excitedly. "The blot on this sheet of paper ain't dry. See, I can smear it easy with my finger. I don't like the look of this, Stocker."

"No more don't I, sergeant," was the answer.

"It's very suspicious about those two doors both being fastened on the inside. The windows was all bolted, too, as we know, because we tried 'em. And if the

doors was fastened on the inside and the windows too, it looks as if them as fastened 'em must be in the house too. Ay, Stocker?"

"It does that, sir," acquiesced the admiring Stocker. "By Jiggins, what a headpiece you've got!"

"Stocker, I'm going to see this thing through—that's what I'm going to do. Hush! what's that?"

"Cistern in the roof a-gurgling, I think, sir. That's what it sounded like."

"Perhaps so. Why, there it is again. It is a most extraordinary noise!"

It certainly was. Even to us overhead who saw it coming—if one may be permitted to speak of "seeing" a noise come—and knew to what it was attributable, the sound seemed weird and unearthly; but to those who heard the noise without knowing its origin, the effect must have been mysterious in the extreme. The day was, as I have already said, windy, and when Hubbock's eye was applied to the open spy-hole in the roof, it was apparently "struck by a squall." So at least we assumed from the red and wa-

tery aspect which the organ in question presented when he returned to his seat. That, however, was an infliction which the rest of us could have borne with becoming resignation; but when certain hideous distortions of the patient's face apprised us of the approach of a seizure which we hoped at first might mean only sudden death or a fit, but which we were alarmed to see developing into a sneeze, we felt that the situation was becoming—in a diplomatic sense—strained. With admirable presence of mind the nearest man to Hubbock handed him a handkerchief to put to his nostrils in place of that which the sufferer had already stuffed into his mouth. Then—like brave men who, having done their best and failed, sit down to wait death calmly—we sat and waited for that sneeze. It was a long time coming. At first it seemed so long that Hope told a flattering tale, and we began—all except Hubbock, who still had the handkerchief stuffed in his mouth—to breathe again. That *he* should breathe again was a matter of only secondary importance, and had he then and there had the

decency and consideration silently to give up the ghost, he would assuredly have carried our good wishes with him wheresoever he may have gone. But Hubbock's breath, so far from passing away in a last low sigh, seemed, as we watched, to swell up suddenly within him. His cheeks became hideously distended, the spaces about his now-protruding eyes puffed up like blown bladders. With a great effort he hunched his straining shoulders toadwise, to his ears, and then—no, I cannot describe it. I got so far as to try to spell it phonetically, but when I saw the unholy thing which I had thoughtlessly called into existence, I tore the paper into fragments and then chewed them into a pulp that no other eye but mine might look upon it again.

As the sound died away, we sat, as if frozen into dreadful silence, staring at Hubbock with eyes of horror and reproach; but when we saw by his fixed, upward-turned and prayerful eyes, dropped jaw and outstretched, imploring hand that a second seizure was impending, we quailed as the soldier in

the trenches quails before the coming shell.

When it was all over, there was a deadly silence for half a minute, and then we knew that the game was up.

"Did you hear that, Stocker?" said a voice in the room below. "Did you hear that? And if so, what d'ye make of it?"

Stocker's mumbled reply was not audible, so we were not enlightened respecting his views.

"Quite so," went on the voice. "It didn't sound human, did it? And if I'd heard it at night, I should have said that this house was haunted, that's what I should have said. But being in the daytime, it can't be that. What's that you say? Very likely a bird that's got a nest in the roof? Don't tell me. Birds don't make noises like that. No, it isn't a wild animal that Mr. Hall's brought home from his travels either, unless it's an animal by the name of Hubbock, and he's wild enough from all showing. Only I don't call him an animal. I call him a murdering, savage brute. Anyhow, I'm going to see what's under that roof, if I

break my neck in doing it. There's a ladder leaning against one of the fruit trees in the orchard, and if we stick it up on top of the portico, we ought to be able to reach the roof. Anyhow, we'll have a try, so come along."

Councillor Number Six, the Silent Councillor, Hall and myself must, I suppose, while this was going on, have been looking the reproaches which we dare not speak, for as soon as the policemen were out of hearing, Hubbock said snappishly,—

"It's quite incompatible that you should all look askance at me as if I was infected with African leprosy. I was in no way cognisant of committing mischief."

"Quite so, Hubbock," assented Number Two; "you couldn't help sneezing, my good man, any more than you can help getting the African leprosy, which I trust you never will. The only mercy is you didn't yawn, for yawning, like the African leprosy, is catching, and sneezing isn't. But the question we've now to consider is, 'What's to be done?' "

"I think," said the appeased Hubbock

more deferentially, "if the council doesn't think the course too ignominious, that it would be advisable to ensconce ourselves under the table. If the policemen climb up on the roof and extract a tile to look in, they can't see us there, and they may conclude that the room is uninhabited."

"By extracting a tile, our friend doesn't mean annexing somebody else's hat," explained Number Two good-humouredly; "all the same, I think he's right. They couldn't see us under the table, and if they come to the conclusion that the room's empty, they may decide to sheer off altogether, or to leave one on guard here, while the other goes on to Tarborough to report progress to the superintendent. The situation is not very serious at the worst, for it would be the easiest thing in the world for us to overpower the two bobbies, and either silence them altogether or leave them here gagged and tied up, while we make off. I don't know that the former course wouldn't be the kindest, for the room might never be discovered, and unless they could manage to make themselves heard, they'd stand a

good chance of dying by slow starvation. But if we can work things to get clear away without coming to blows with the bobbies, I'd rather that it were so. They may think this is only an ordinary billiard room that I've contrived up here for a fad, and that they couldn't find the entrance to, and that as Hubbock and I seemed away, there's nothing to be done but wait until we come back to arrest our friend here. Apparently it's he they want, not me, whom they still appear to look upon as a reputable member of society. I think our friends outside are propping the ladder against the wall, in which case it will be time to adjourn to under the table."

Before very long we heard the sound of some one clambering from a ladder to the roof, and cautiously picking his way, apparently on hands and knees, towards the top. By-and-by the sound of a moving body ceased, and then we heard the working and wrenching, which told us that the new-comer was engaged in removing some tiles. Meanwhile we "lay low," ensconced ignominiously, as Hubbock

phrased it, well out of sight under the billiard table. The position was so cramped that I was, if anything, relieved to know, by an exclamation of astonishment from the "extractor of tiles" overhead, that the secret chamber of Heath Cottage was a secret no longer.

"Hi! Stocker! are you there?" called an excited voice which I recognised as the sergeant's.

"I'm here, sir," came the reply from below.

"I always did think that Hall was a bad lot, for all his seeming so quiet and respectable," said the sergeant. "It's always the quietest ones as is the worst. What d'ye think he's got up here?"

"Fowls?" suggested Stocker lamely. He was not a man of many ideas, and, having lately covered himself with glory by the brilliant arrest and conviction of two small boys who were robbing a henroost—the prevention of poultry pilfering filled a very important place in his conception of the duties of a constable. "Yes, fowls, I expect," he added more confidently; "leastway, stolen ones that

he's kept up there to be out of the way. It sounded like fowls when we heard that noise just now."

"Fowls!" retorted his superior officer contemptuously; "fowls, you fool! You've got fowls on the brain since you got those boys convicted. No, it's something worse than fowls, I can tell you. I always did think that Hall wasn't all he should be. And him so quiet too! Well! well! there's no knowing what any one's character is till he's found out. It's a harem, that's what it is. I've seen a picture of one in the *Windsor Magazine*, and recognise it easy. There's hanging lamps that don't look as if they was meant to burn respectable oil in decent houses. And there's couches without any legs, like a bed made up on the floor—divans, don't they call 'em?—all in stripes and gaudy colours, and heaped up with soft pillows. Downright heathenish, I call it. There's a big table in the middle that's got a big white cloth flung over it as if there was something on it that was too wicked even for Hall to look at long. We shall find something pretty there, I'll promise you,

when we get down. Well, well, it's a wicked world we live in."

"Is there any women there?" inquired the intelligent Stocker, with more interest than he had previously manifested. "A harem's a place where they keep a lot of lovely women, ain't it? I've seen one at the 'Quarium when I went to London. They had golden hair, and wore trousers made of gold and stuff, and lay about on couches and looked cross."

"No, that's what I can't make out," replied his chief. "There ain't no women, but there soon will be, you mark my words. Hall and Hubbock have gone to fetch 'em, now they have got it all ready. That's why there's no one at home to-day. A pretty pair of rascals they are, a-bringing their Romand Catholick ways into a Christian country. I'll harem 'em before I've done. You go and see if you can find me a bit of rope so as I can fasten it to the chimney stack and let myself down into the room. I'm going to see what's on that table, harem or no harem."

The search for a rope was apparently

successful, and as the sergeant had in the meanwhile been working hard to make the hole in the roof large enough to admit his body, he bade Stocker come up and hold on to the end which was hitched to the chimney stack, while he lowered himself into the room.

Curiosity getting the better of discretion, I very guardedly inclined my head outward an inch or two beyond the projecting rim of the table, and twisting my neck round, looked up.

The sergeant, hanging on to the rope, had just got clear of the hole in the roof, and was preparing to lower himself down hand-over-hand. Through the opening over his head, the red and bovine face of Stocker was staring. He was watching the sergeant's progress with eager interest, but the movement of my withdrawing head apparently attracting his attention, he craned through the aperture, and catching sight of me, pointed down with an excited yell to where I was lying.

Whether the shout so startled the sergeant as to cause him to lose his hold, or whether what happened was caused by

the letting go by Stocker of the end of the rope which was hitched around the chimney stack, I cannot say. All I know is that the unfortunate sergeant fell with a crash, pulling down with him one of the lamps that lighted the table. This lamp, though of oriental and ancient manufacture, had been prostituted by Hall to so base a use as the burning of paraffin; and as artificial light was a necessary, even during the day-time, in our prophet's chamber, the lamp was unfortunately burning at the time. As it fell it struck the edge of the table and cannoned—a terrible tongue of fire—against the wall, which, as the reader knows, was draped, tentwise, from floor to ceiling with some Indian fabrics. The room, being directly under the roof, was always hot, and this fabric had evidently become as dry and inflammable as tinder.

CHAPTER XXIV

"FIRE!"

There was, as I have twice already mentioned, a strong wind blowing outside, and this doubtless played no little part in bringing about what followed.

I remember that as the lamp fell, a licking tongue of fire ran—like a monkey running up a rope—along the drapery, and that before I had time to get out from under the table, almost before the gaping face of Stocker had disappeared from the hole overhead, the entire roof was one sheet of flame. I learnt afterwards from Number Two that he had the house re-tiled before he and Hubbock had set about constructing the secret chamber. The intelligent British workman to whom the task was entrusted had made a heavy additional charge in the bill for what he called "weather-proofing" the roof, by a method of his own inventing, upon which he greatly plumed himself. In the

matter of keeping rain out, this system of weather-proofing gave Hall every satisfaction, but, viewed from another standpoint, it caused him considerable uneasiness, for he had recently discovered that the material used for wadding the interstices between the tiles, was a kind of skein oakum, which, being saturated with tar, was highly inflammable. Like every wise man, Number Two had a horror of fire, and he at once decided to substitute an asbestos preparation for the oakum. The asbestos had been procured, and the work of substitution commenced, when the unexpected advent of the conspirators, and their instalment at Heath Cottage, put a stop to a work which the fates had decreed should never be finished, for within three minutes from the falling of the lamp, the upper part of Heath Cottage was a royal roaring furnace.

"Warm work, that!" gasped Number Two breathlessly, when he, Hubbock, the Silent Councillor, Number Six, and myself,—coughing and choking and not all unsinged,—found ourselves outside. "Warm for the bobbies, too, poor devils.

The man on the roof was in the thick of the fire, and must be a cinder by now. I think the other chap hurt himself when he fell; anyhow, he hasn't got out, and never will now. We'd better be off, and by separate ways. The neighbours will be here in no time. But we must settle some place of meeting first. Where shall it be, and when? I know. To-morrow morning at twelve, by the bookstall at St. Pancras Station. I'll secure a carriage to ourselves by the Southend train, and we can talk things over going down. No one will notice us there, and if they do, they'll only think we are going to a bean-feast party. So we are, for we're going to give some of them 'beans' before we've done with them—aren't we? Now I'm off, and you'd better do the same."

As the other four struck across the field I made for the high road. I had snatched up my hat when leaving the cottage, and as there was nothing in my dress to attract attention, and I had no reason to believe that I was known personally to, or wanted by, the police, I thought my safest plan would be to go boldly ahead.

After I had walked a mile or so, I met a black-bearded man dressed as if for bicycling and wearing a cloth cap.

"Can you tell me," he said politely, "which is the shortest way to a house called Heath Cottage, in the occupation of a Mr. Hall?"

"No," I replied, "I can't."

"Then you are a stranger in this neighbourhood?" he asked.

"I'm a stranger to you," I said curtly, resenting his inquisitiveness.

"I see. Then when you said just now that you couldn't tell me my way to Heath Cottage, you meant that you didn't want to?"

"If you like," I answered. "Take it either way. It's none of your business."

"Oh, yes, it is," was his off-hand reply. "I happen to be a police officer, you see, and I shall have to trouble you to return with me as far as Tarborough."

Then he burst into a laugh. "Don't upset yourself, Number Seven. I only wanted to satisfy myself that the disguise was all right, and it certainly seems to be

so, since you didn't recognise your chief and late host."

"You took me by surprise," I said, feeling and looking rather foolish, "and gave me a bit of a fright into the bargain. I recognise you now easily enough. But to meet you coming in this direction and in a disguise was enough to deceive any one. How on earth did you manage it in the time? You haven't been into the cottage again, surely?"

"Easiest thing in the world, my dear fellow," he said, lightly. "My motto is, 'Always be prepared for an emergency.' When you saw me last, some twenty minutes ago, I was wearing a pepper-and-salt coat and trousers. But my clothes are all made with two sides to them. There's nothing unusual about this coat, is there, except that it is buttoned close, as all my coats are. But if you turn it inside out, it would be pepper-and-salt again instead of blue serge. I always wear stockings instead of socks, and the arrangement of my own by which I can change trousers into knickerbockers is simple, and works so well, that I think of

patenting it one day. The beard and the cap I carry in my pocket, so I made a dressing-room of the first secluded place I came to, and here I am, very much at your service.

"Now look here, Number Seven," he went on, changing his tone abruptly. "I slipped across the fields to intercept you because I want a word with you. This council is getting a ghastly farce. You and I and Hubbock can work together all right, but the other two are simply dead-heads. Perhaps it's my fault. I begin to realize that I was mistaken in thinking I could handle the team as Number One did. That man was a positive genius. His organising power was marvellous. The six of us worked together under him like oarsmen in a boat. There was no waste effort. He used the whole of us, and put out his men when he had any little scheme on, like a captain placing his team in the cricket field. Now everything's changed. One or two of us bring the brains and do the work, and the rest just look on, and take no risk nor part in the business except sharing the profits.

It's not like the same thing it used to be. You weren't a member of the syndicate in those days. Then it was a power in the world. Then things were planned and carried out on a big scale. Number One was a genius and worked the six of us, for what we were worth, so that we were all like so many wheels in one big perfectly acting machine. Now we are just a gang of vulgar criminals, with nothing in common between us either in mind or methods except that we share the plunder alike. The syndicate has gone to pieces since the chief's death. I thought I could step into his shoes, and take it up and carry it on from the point he left it at; but I've found out my mistake by now, and I can see no good and a precious lot of danger in our hanging together any longer.

"But I'm going to make just one more attempt to carry a big scheme through, upon the lines the chief used to go upon, so that each member of the council bears his part. If it fails, I shall chuck it, and retire from the syndicate altogether. You and I and Hubbock could run the show

better without the other two than with them, and there'd be only three instead of five to share the profits. I fancy you'll see your way to join us, and to throw those two fools over. That's all I have to say to you, and I'm going now. But think it over, and if you feel inclined to stand in with us, put a flower of some sort in your button-hole to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXV

SCOUNDRELS AND COMPANY

I did think it over, with the result that when I sauntered up to the bookstall at St. Pancras on the following morning, the button-hole of my tweed jacket was made gay by a sprig of red geranium.

Number Two looked approvingly at it, as he gave me "Good-morning," and Hubbock's little eyes leered meaningly at mine as he complimented me obsequiously on "the lovely flower" I was wearing.

A handsome tip to the guard having secured a first-class carriage to ourselves, Number Two came to the point as soon as the train was beginning to move out of the station.

"My friends," he said, "I have been through the accounts to-day, and I'm sorry to say there is a big falling off in subscriptions. The loss of that £5,000 may have done us harm in the way of shaking public confidence, but on the

other hand if we had succeeded in our attempt upon Lord Cranthorpe's house or if I had not failed in my Jubilee Scheme, or Hubbock in his Ishmael Club programme, I believe that our finances would have been as flourishing as ever. But we haven't much time to spare this morning, and the immediate question before us is, 'How are we to retrieve our position?' One big blow at the authorities will turn the tide in our favour again and bring the coin in. But this time we mustn't fail, and it seems to me that the only way to ensure success is to back more horses than one. I have a plan for bringing off four different 'events' on the same evening. One or more may fall through, but if we have four running, we are bound to get home with at least one. If we should be so lucky as to bring off two or three, or, as is possible, the entire four, why, we shall have all the more reason to congratulate ourselves, for every extra score will mean extra coin in the way of subscriptions. But if only one out of the lot proves a winner, we shall at least feel, and shall make the public feel,

..at we have done something for our ..oney. Here's my scheme. I have ..ough dynamite still in hand to effect ..ur big explosions. There is enough ..eally for twice that number, but I want the explosion to be the sort of thing to set all London rattling, and I propose to double the quantity of the stuff. The next question is, 'What shall we blow up?' Well, my idea is that we have a go at New Scotland Yard and three of the prisons, Holloway, Newgate and Pentonville. I propose doing the business in this way. The infernal machines will be rather heavy, and not at all convenient things to cart about London; so I vote that we engage a private brougham for the evening. One of us will have to be driver, and each of the other four will have to be answerable for an infernal machine, and for placing it where it can do the greatest amount of damage to the building which has been assigned to him. I'll take New Scotland Yard myself, as the most dangerous, and you can settle it among yourselves who shall be driver and who shall take the other places. The

driver will pick the four of us up at points we can settle on, and when the circle's complete he will drive to Holloway, dropping the first man with the box of Holloway's Pills, by which I mean the infernal machine, at the most convenient spot, and picking him up again, after the thing has been placed and the fuse ignited. By that means the dynamiter can get clean away from the neighbourhood some time before the explosion occurs. Then we drive on to Pentonville to do ditto there. Thence to Newgate, and after that to Scotland Yard. There will be no cabmen to come forward with evidence about their fares and where they got in and out. I think the risks will be fairly distributed. Perhaps the driver's got the best of it, as he hasn't got to place and light the machines; but on the other hand he must undertake to procure the carriage, and unless he can contrive to steal it, there is always the chance of the police getting wind of the way the thing has been done, in which case his identity will be the clue they'll have to work upon, and he will be the first man they'll look for. Well, are

you 'on' for my scheme or 'off'? Please yourselves. Hubbock's with me, I know, but what do you other three say?"

The other three assenting, Number Two went on: "That's all right. Now the next question is not, 'Who killed Cock Robin?' but, 'Who'll drive the cab?' I'd rather it were one of you three, for I want Hubbock to undertake Holloway Prison. He knows it well. Too well, don't you, Hubbock?—the inside as well as the out. Can you drive, Number Four?"

"I'd rather not, unless I must," was the reply.

"I don't suppose it will be a case of 'needs must,' though it will be 'the devil driving,' " laughed Number Two.

"What about you, Number Six? Can you handle the ribbons?"

"No, I can't drive at all," responded the councillor addressed.

"H'm! Your education's being neglected. How about you, Number Seven?"

"I'll drive," I replied promptly; "I'm quite at home at it, and I know London well."

"Capital. That will do, then. Now to settle the other preliminaries."

The details of these "other preliminaries" may be spared the reader. Before the train reached Southend everything was settled—the day, or rather night, for the series of explosions fixed, and the time and place of meeting.

. . . . . .

It was nearing eleven o'clock as, with all my villainous crew inside, I whipped up the horses as we approached the grey walls of Holloway Prison. My instructions were to pass the main entrance at a slow trot, and to pull up sharp when I heard Number Two tap twice at the carriage window. Outside the entrance a man was standing. His attitude was that of a lounger, but the queer way in which he looked up and down the road, every now and then, belied the indolent air he had assumed, and as we trundled towards him, he started, took a step forward, and then, as if recollecting himself, stopped short, and stood stiff and still like a well-trained setter at sight of a bird. I felt that the man's eyes were upon me and

upon the carriage, and raised my whip to lash the horses. He saw the action and snapped out the word "Now," like an officer giving the word of command, and the next instant we were level with the entrance. Jerking my right rein violently, I switched the horses round at right angles, whipping them up mercilessly meanwhile, and dashed into the prison yard at a gallop.

As the ponderous gates swung to behind us, Hall, followed by Hubbock, leapt out, but, almost as their feet touched ground, the black shadows on either side swarmed suddenly into men, who had seized and secured the four conspirators before the echoing clang of the closing gates had died away.

The psychological moment for which I had waited so long—too long—had come.

"What does this mean, Number Seven?" hissed the now handcuffed Number Two as I got down from the box.

"It means," I said, "that I have been a spy upon you all along, and that I told the governor of the gaol why we were coming here to-night, and arranged with

him that the waving of my whip should be the signal for the gates to open."

"My God!" he said quietly, "and I mistook you for a gentleman."

. . . . . .

The case has not come on for trial yet, as the police are completing their investigations and their chain of evidence. They tell me that what I know against the conspirators is but dust in the balance compared to the calendar of crime of which the syndicate has been guilty, and that, in effecting the arrest of Number Two, I have been instrumental in bringing to justice one of the greatest criminals of modern times.

All the same, I do not feel very proud of my share in the matter.

THE END

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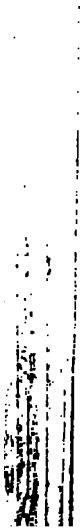

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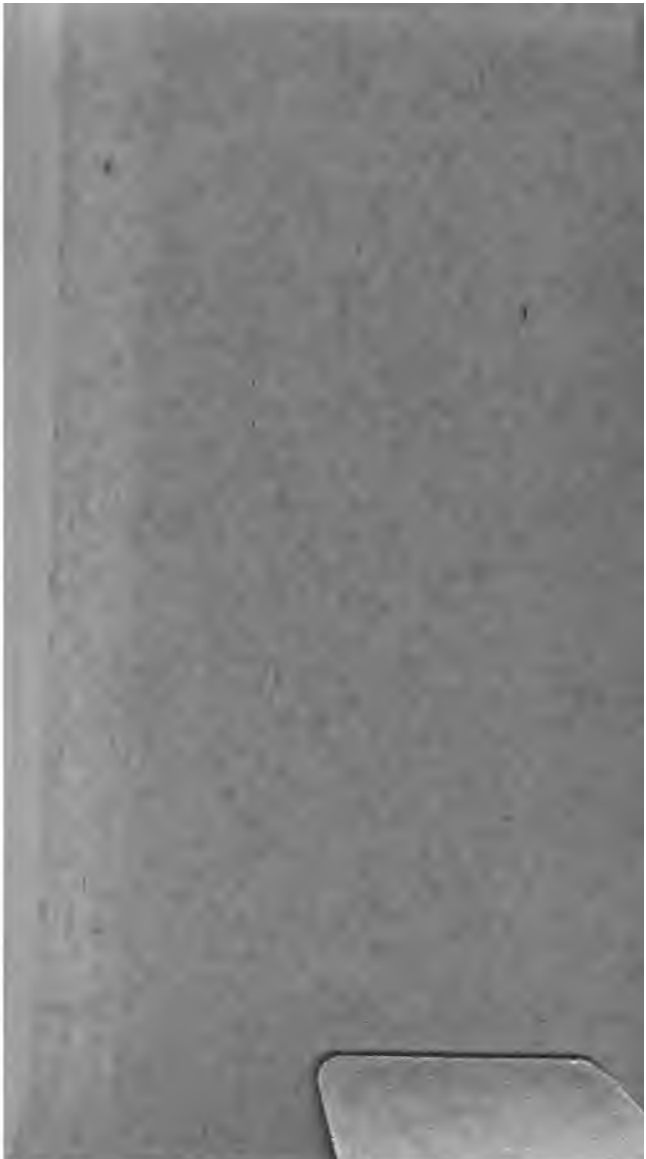
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